

Child Death Review Board

Queensland **Family & Child** Commission

Understanding parenting capacity

Review Summary 2026

The critical distinction between willingness and ability

Parental willingness to engage with services is an important indicator of motivation. Engagement, participation in meetings, and expressed commitment to caring for a child may reflect intent and readiness to change. However, willingness alone does not necessarily demonstrate a parent's functional capacity to provide consistent, safe and nurturing care.

Under the *Child Protection Act 1999* (Qld), a child may remain with, or be placed in the care of, a parent only where that parent is both willing and able to protect them from harm. While families hold primary responsibility for the care and protection of children, statutory intervention is required when either willingness or capacity is absent.

The Child Death Review Board's thematic analysis of twelve cases identified circumstances in which parental willingness was clearly evident, yet the parent's practical ability to consistently meet the child's needs was not fully understood. Across these cases, families often experienced multiple and interacting vulnerabilities, including mental ill health, domestic and family violence, substance use, and cognitive impairment. These factors can affect day-to-day caregiving capacity in ways that are not always visible through engagement alone.

Parenting capacity is best understood as a functional and dynamic concept. It encompasses not only willingness and intent, but also the practical ability to provide safe care, respond appropriately to a child's needs, and sustain protective caregiving over time. Overestimating ability based solely on engagement may create risk, particularly where cases are closed, oversight is reduced, or in-home arrangements are maintained without structured and multidisciplinary assessment.

By sharing these emerging insights, the Board aims to support reflection and continuous improvement across the child and family system. Strengthening understanding of the distinction between willingness and functional capacity is central to improving assessment, decision-making, and outcomes for children.

Ability: capacity to protect and care for the child.

Willingness: motivation and readiness to do so.

- Child Safety Practice Manual

Key Insights

- ***Engagement does not necessarily indicate functional caregiving capacity***
- ***Parenting capacity may be shaped by complex, interacting factors***
- ***Capacity is dynamic and may change over time***
- ***Structured assessment supports clearer understanding of capacity***

Engagement does not necessarily indicate functional caregiving capacity

Parents may actively engage with services and express commitment to their child’s wellbeing; however, engagement alone does not necessarily demonstrate the capacity to consistently provide safe care.

In practice, the distinction between willingness and functional capacity is not always clearly operationalised. Assessments may place significant weight on participation in case plans or programs, without equally rigorous evaluation of day-to-day caregiving capability and the supports required to sustain safe parenting.

Across the cases examined, intellectual disability and mental ill health were often acknowledged but not consistently explored in terms of their functional impact on caregiving. Decisions at times appeared to rely heavily on engagement and expressed commitment, rather than structured, multidisciplinary assessment of capacity and support needs.

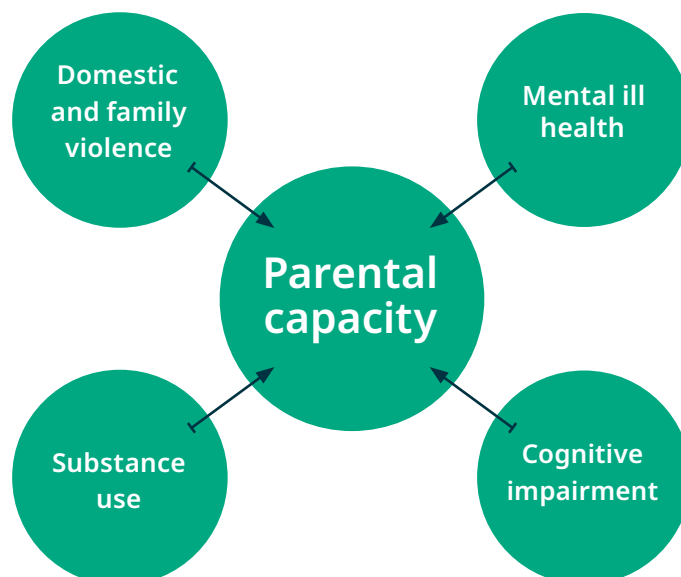
Engagement can remain steady even where symptoms of mental illness, cognitive impairment, or developmental challenges affect practical caregiving ability. Structured assessment helps ensure that motivation and participation are considered alongside a clear understanding of functional capacity and family context.

In some instances, parents themselves expressed uncertainty about their ability to manage caregiving demands. Structured assessment provides an opportunity to clarify strengths, identify support needs, and determine whether safe care can be sustained over time.

For example, in one case a parent demonstrated insight and willingness to engage in relevant programs. However, their young age, limited life experience, and cognitive and developmental challenges raised ongoing concerns about their ability to independently meet the child’s needs without substantial and sustained support.

Decisions, at times, appeared to rely heavily on engagement and expressed commitment, rather than structured, multidisciplinary assessment of capacity and support needs.

Factors impacting parental capacity



Parenting capacity may be shaped by complex, interacting factors

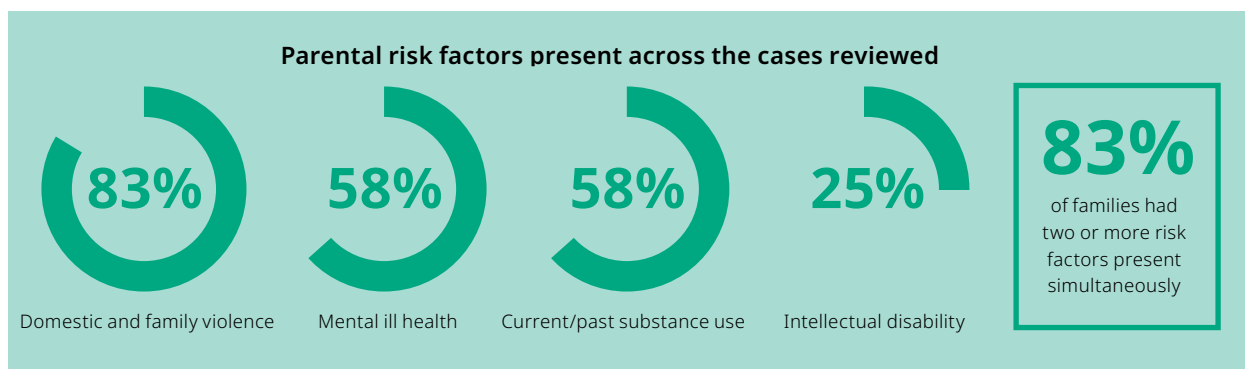
Multiple and interacting vulnerabilities may affect a parent’s functional caregiving capacity, even where willingness to engage and parent is clearly evident. Across the twelve cases reviewed, families frequently experienced overlapping risk factors, including mental ill health, domestic and family violence, substance use, and cognitive impairment. These factors often compounded one another, creating circumstances in which functional capacity was more difficult to assess and sustain.

When willingness is mistaken for ability, risk can remain unseen.

Cognitive impairment, in particular, may be challenging to evaluate where support systems rely heavily on verbal instruction or complex service navigation. Without structured and multidisciplinary assessment, the practical impact on day-to-day caregiving can remain insufficiently understood.

In several cases, mental ill health was noted in safety assessments but not systematically examined in terms of its functional effect on parenting or on the child’s safety. A diagnosis alone does not determine parenting capacity; however, understanding how symptoms influence supervision, responsiveness, emotional availability, and consistency of care is critical to informed decision-making.

Similarly, sustained exposure to violence and coercive dynamics may diminish a parent’s capacity to provide stable, predictable, and emotionally responsive care, particularly where other vulnerabilities are present. A functional assessment approach helps ensure that these interacting factors are understood in context and that appropriate supports are identified to promote child safety and wellbeing.



Potential risk factor effects on parenting

Mental ill health	Domestic and family violence	Substance use	Cognitive impairment
May affect emotional availability, consistency of care	May affect stability, safety, and caregiving capacity	May affect supervision, responsiveness, decision-making	May affect planning, routine, and application of support
Decision-making	Increased stress	Decreased ability to provide sustainable, predictable care	Managing stress
Ability to respond to child's needs, particularly when parental illness is persistent/fluctuating	Reduced physical, emotional, and psychological resources	Reduced responsiveness, particularly where other vulnerabilities are present or compounding	Additional system navigation support needs
Increased unpredictability when mental illness is acute	Diminished confidence in caregiving		Responsiveness consistency, particularly under stress
	Increased financial hardship		
	Increased social isolation		

Capacity is dynamic and may change over time

Parenting capacity is not static; it may fluctuate in response to changes in mental health stability, the availability of practical and social supports, the safety of the home environment, and broader life stressors or crises. Capacity is shaped by the interaction between individual circumstances, available supports, and changing family dynamics.

In the context of domestic and family violence, parenting capacity may vary depending on safety, stability, and access to protective supports. Similarly, patterns of substance use, recovery, treatment engagement, and support availability can influence a parent's ability to provide consistent care.

For these reasons, ongoing assessment is critical. Parenting capacity is best understood as a functional concept that reflects not only a parent's current abilities, but also whether the necessary supports are in place, and can be sustained, to maintain safe caregiving over time.

The literature emphasises that capacity is most accurately understood when assessed within the context of both strengths and support needs. This balanced and contextual approach helps guard against both overestimation and underestimation of caregiving capacity.

Practice insight: Structured parenting capacity assessment

Structured parenting capacity assessments are recognised in some jurisdictions as a tool to support understanding of parenting capacity where concerns exist about a parent's ability to provide safe care.

These assessments typically involve multidisciplinary evaluation and draw on multiple sources of information, including observation of parent-child interaction, clinical assessment, and collateral information.

Structured approaches support understanding of:

- a parent's functional caregiving capacity
- support needs required to sustain safe parenting
- readiness for change
- whether safe care can be maintained over time

These approaches reinforce the importance of assessing parenting capacity holistically and functionally.

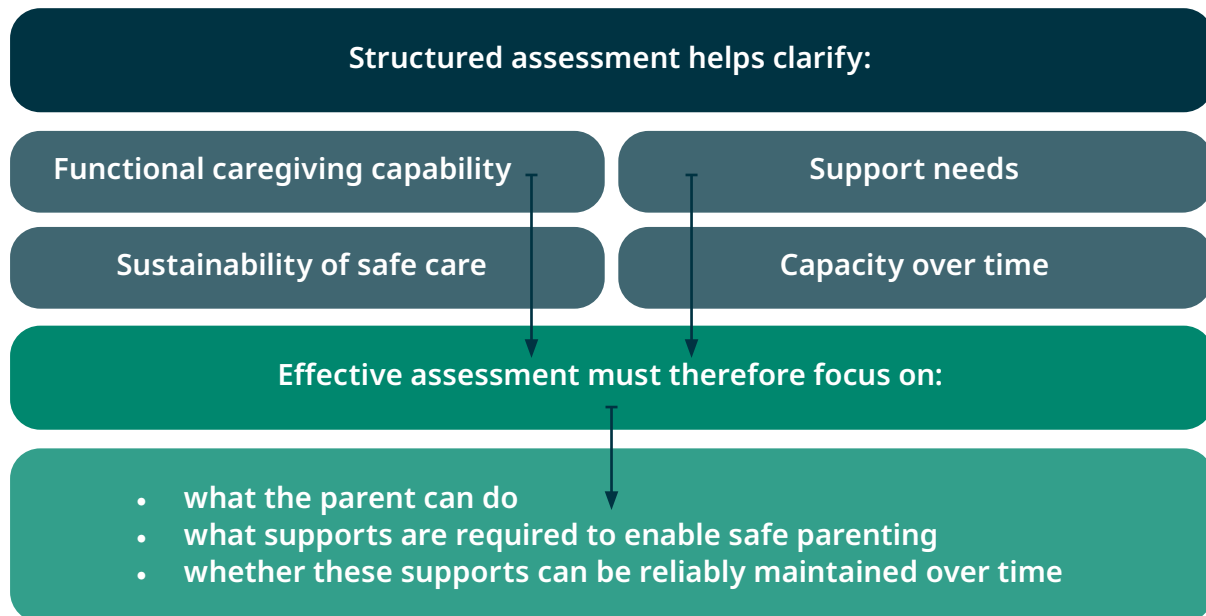
Structured assessment supports clearer understanding of capacity

Structured assessment offers a systematic and multidisciplinary approach to evaluating parenting capacity. It supports a clearer understanding of functional caregiving ability, identifies support needs, and assesses whether safe care can be sustained over time.

Such approaches are particularly valuable in complex circumstances involving interacting factors such as mental ill health, intellectual impairment, substance use, or domestic and family violence, where the impact on day-to-day caregiving may not be immediately apparent.

By drawing on multiple sources of information, including observation of parent-child interactions, clinical expertise, and multidisciplinary input, structured assessment enables a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of family circumstances.

Structured parenting capacity assessment



System reflection

Emerging insights from the Board's thematic reviews reinforce the importance of understanding parenting capacity as a functional and dynamic concept, shaped by context, supports, and changing circumstances

Structured, multidisciplinary approaches enable a clearer assessment of caregiving capability, support needs, and family context. These findings invite continued reflection across the child and family system on how assessment processes can be strengthened to support safe, sustainable, and developmentally appropriate caregiving.

***The Board is preparing to highlight these issues in its next annual report.
If you have thoughts to contribute, please contact cdrb@qfcc.qld.gov.au***