

Chapter 8

Christy and the Endangering 'C' Strategy



Introduction

This is Christy, age 26. She is being interviewed by a social worker as part of a parenting assessment. Christy has two daughters, aged six and four, and is three months pregnant. Longstanding concerns about Christy recently came to a head following a violent incident which was provoked by her boyfriend Craig taunting Christy and threatening to leave her. As a result of the violence, both of them needed treatment in the accident and emergency department of the local hospital. As this incident occurred within the context of longstanding and cumulative concerns by a number of agencies, the decision was taken to remove the children and undertake a comprehensive assessment of the situation. Christy's children were placed together with foster parents.

Christy has been well known to the local health visitor, children's centre and family support services. As a child, she and her family were known to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and the educational psychology and educational welfare services. There have been numerous crises throughout her life that have caused professionals to be concerned about Christy. Following the birth of her first child, Christy was offered a high level of support, which has continued through the children's centre and the health visitor. Although there have been concerns

throughout this period, the severity of the recent incident, which occurred in front of the children, combined with the fact that Christy is pregnant, has triggered the formal involvement of social services.

Christy's background

Christy's mother, Linda, was originally from a middle-class family. Linda fell into drug use when she met Christy's father, who was a heavy drugs user. As a consequence, Linda was rejected in adulthood by her own mother, Christy's grandmother.

Christy was raised by both parents until she was four, at which point her parents separated and she would sometimes stay with one and sometimes the other. When Christy was five, her mother formed a new relationship with a man called Frank, who was often violent, and they had three more children over the next seven years. Despite the violence and frequent separations, the relationship between Linda and Frank continued off and on for the next 10 years.

During this period, Linda was hospitalised on several occasions for physical and mental illnesses, but Christy was too young to understand the exact nature of these illnesses. On one of these occasions, during a period of separation between Frank and Linda, Christy and her younger siblings stayed for three months with a foster parent called Elizabeth. After Christy and her siblings returned home, Elizabeth continued to maintain contact with her. Indeed, Christy still has occasional contact now with 'Auntie Lizzie' and says she 'should have been my mum'.

When Christy was 11, and while her mother was in hospital giving birth to her youngest sibling, she was sexually abused by Frank whilst he was home and supposed to be looking after her and her younger brother and sister. Christy has mentioned this to a variety of professionals, including a health visitor, after her first child was born. (The police have taken her statement about the abuse, and an arrest warrant remains outstanding, although no one has been able to locate Frank.)

As a teenager, Christy was excluded from two schools for getting into fights with peers and for angry and provoking behaviour towards male and female teachers. She ended up in a special school for pupils who are unable to cope with mainstream education. Christy managed to pass two GCSE exams, but left school at 16.

Between the ages of 17 and 18, Christy had a number of boyfriends and was 'date raped' on several occasions by boys she knew. She was also self-harming during this time period – by cutting her arms – and she continues to do so.

When Christy was 19 years old, she formed a relationship with Darren, who was 21, and she became pregnant six months later. Christy and Darren had two children within three years, but never lived together. Their relationship ended when Darren was sent to prison after a fight in a pub. Christy has had no contact with him for four years.

When Christy was 23, she formed a relationship with Craig, also 23, whom she had known in the neighbourhood since they were both teenagers. Several months into the

relationship, Craig moved in with Christy. Craig was heavily into drug use, and sold drugs locally on a small scale. Christy began to use drugs occasionally, but her drug use was more to do with the excitement and lifestyle of living with Craig. It felt to her like a Bonnie and Clyde style adventure and Christy enjoyed playing cat and mouse with the police.

It has been several years since Christy used drugs, the result of her conscious choice to avoid arrest and losing her children. Nevertheless, she continues to be excited by the volatility of her relationship with Craig and his small time criminal/drug-dealing lifestyle. Christy is also constantly worried that Craig will leave her and find another girlfriend.

Recently, Christy and Craig had a massive argument. It followed a pattern in which Craig had been teasing and taunting Christy about her poor cooking and the untidy state of the house. This culminated with Craig threatening once again to walk out on Christy and the children. This soon broke down into a loud slanging match overheard by the neighbours and witnessed by Christy's daughters, who were cowering on the stairs. During this escalating argument, in which Christy was at one point screaming into Craig's face, he attempted to push past her to get out of the kitchen. As Craig was doing this, Christy threw a kitchen chair at him and cut his head. In response, Craig pushed her back violently against the kitchen table and she broke three of her ribs.

Throughout her involvement with professionals, Christy has made it clear that she loves her children and has always feared that they would be taken into care. During the current assessment, Christy has disclosed that she is sometimes scared about her own violent feelings and does not understand why she is the way she is. She is very direct in her descriptions about shocking episodes in her past and has stated, 'Sometimes I can't believe I'm still alive after everything that's happened to me'. Christy reports that despite seeking help and support, none of the professionals have been able to help her, and that she will do anything to 'get my kids back'.

Whilst Christy has occasional bursts of insight, she is easily drawn back into patterns that alternate between angry and rejecting outbursts, and feeling very sorry for herself. She can all too easily fall out with one professional and move to another. Professionals often feel that she plays them off against each other, alternately praising one person and then criticising others. As a result, communication between professionals working with Christy has never been easy, and they often feel a sense of exhaustion in working with her. Despite this, the patterns of crises in her life are such that professionals have remained involved, due to concern not only about Christy but also about her children.

Christy's only sources of non-professional support are two female friends and her youngest sister. She attends the local children's centre. Christy says that she won't let any of her family other than her youngest sister near her daughters as they are all, as she puts it, 'demented'.

Milestones in Christy's development

Christy at age two



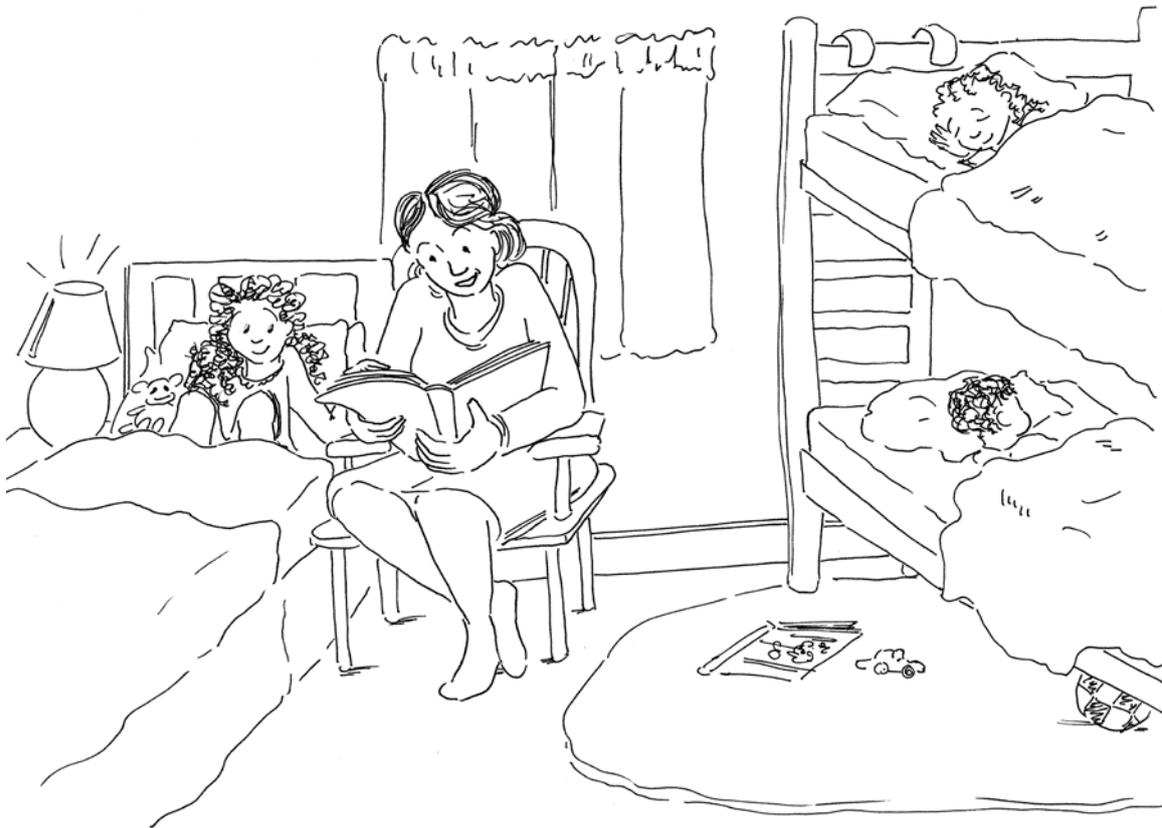
Christy is two-and-a-half years old, and her parents are both using drugs. Christy is screaming, trying to wake them up. Her mother is just able to reach out her hand to try to comfort Christy.



What is the function of Christy's self-protective behaviour at age two-and-a-half?

With both of her parents using drugs, Christy finds that she cannot predict when they will be available for her or not. Sometimes, when her mother is relatively sober, she offers Christy basic care, and occasionally they have good moments together. The rest of the time, when her mother is out of sight or in a drug-induced stupor, Christy has learned to exaggerate her fear, her anger and her clinginess in order to gain a response. She has also learned to resist being comforted or soothed, which keeps her problems unresolvable. This requires her mother to stay engaged with her, and in this way Christy increases the predicability of her mother's behaviour. Christy is often called 'cheeky', 'difficult' and 'a spoilt madam' by her parents.

Christy at age nine



Christy is now nine years old, and she and her brother and sister are staying for three months with Elizabeth, a foster mother. Elizabeth shows genuine care and concern for the three children. Christy listens with delight as Elizabeth reads her stories, and often begs for 'just one more'. Elizabeth finds that she has to spend a good deal of time reassuring Christy that she will still be there in the morning.



What is the function of Christy's self-protective behaviour at age nine?

When staying with Elizabeth, Christy is able to relax and enjoy herself, and to be a playful child for the first time in her life. Initially, Christy responds to Elizabeth's consistent care and attention with clinginess and fear, needing extra reassurance from Elizabeth. Eventually, she realises that Elizabeth means what she says, is predictable, and keeps to her word. For the first time in her life, Christy laughs, plays and relaxes without having to be preoccupied about whether her attachment figure is available or not.

Christy at age 15



At age 15, Christy is shouting at her teacher in front of the class. She is excited and on an adrenaline high. She is not sure how far she will push it, but she knows that however the teacher responds, she will have the upper hand; she will either take the victim role and accuse the teacher of assaulting or bullying her ('because she has it in for me!'), or she will intimidate the teacher into submission. Later, when confronted by the Head of the school, Christy cries and says that she regrets her actions and will behave better next time.

This pattern continues, and Christy is excluded from several schools as a result.



What is the function of Christy's self-protective behaviour at age 15?

When she is challenged by her teacher for being late to class, Christy explodes with rage. She blames the teacher and, when she is challenged, she takes the victim role. The short-term payoff is that everyone's attention is focused fully on Christy, and she feels exhilarated by the adrenaline high and sense of power, even if there are negative consequences, such as being excluded from school. For Christy, exaggerating her anger, fear and need for comfort are ways to get attention and interaction from adults and peers. The strategy she learned as a toddler is still operating, largely on a procedural level and not consciously thought through. An additional complicating factor is that Christy's strategy involves rapid alternations between her displays of anger, fear and need for comfort. This confuses the people around her, because they cannot work out what she really wants. This pattern will be repeated later in her life, when a wide range of professionals are left confused and exhausted by Christy.

Christy's interviews

The following section is a verbatim transcript of the audio recording accompanying this guide.

Christy's first interview – Introduction

Voiceover

In the following interview, Christy, age 26, is being interviewed by a social worker as part of a parenting assessment. Her two daughters, aged six and four, have recently been placed in foster care following violence between Christy and her boyfriend.

The following segment is taken from Christy's third interview. Her first two interviews were concerned with establishing a working contract and building a foundation for exploring Christy's way of understanding of her life, her patterns of behaviour and how she has become the person she is. As part of this exploration, the social worker has helped Christy to describe her family tree and key life events. Christy understands that, in this session, she will be asked about her early relationship with her mother. She has agreed to discuss this with the social worker.

We pick up the interview part of the way through the session.

Interview transcript – Christy's first interview

Interviewer: [Step two: *Exploring the story*] **Okay, Christy, we'll, we'll carry on with the next question. I'd like you to think of three words or phrases that describe something about your early relationship with your mother.**

Christy: Yeah, uhh, yeah. [quietly, looking pained and frightened] That's really hard. What do you mean by words or phrases?

Interviewer: [Step two: *Exploring the story*] **Well, if you were to think back, to when you were young, can you think of anything ...**

Christy: [cuts off interviewer, becoming animated] Well she was just *always out of it*. I mean how far back do you want me to go? There's just so *much* that was wrong with her. You know what I mean? She was a smack head [heroin addict] for one thing, and it was [following said angrily] all about her and Frank, 'Frank this Frank that, blah blah blah', do you know what – it's like – [exasperated, very slight laugh] there was just – there was *no time for me* at all. In fact I brought meself up. If you ask me I'm amazed I'm alive today what I went through – the hell she put me through. [Angrily] And then she's got the nerve to call me a bad mother! If she was here right now do you know what I'd say to her? I'd tell her straight,

[angry, mocking] 'You'd be the LAST person I'd go to for help! You couldn't even help yourself! Hah! – Sorry, what was the question?

Interviewer: [Step one: *Listening to the story*] **Well, you've mentioned that she was 'always out of it', and that there was 'no time for you'. Have I, have I got that right?**

Christy: Yeah.

Interviewer: [Step two: *Exploring the story*] **Um, and I wonder if you can think of a third word or phrase that might help –**

Christy: [cuts off interviewer] Well, yeah, um, oh, it's like, she was like, she was like, *she was a sad case*, is that what you want? She was a sad case, she was in and out hospital all through my childhood, they said she had one of those trauma things, you know, what do you call it? You know, um, post-traumatic stress? Yeah? Well anyway I've got that, too. Do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: **Okay, so what I've got written here is 'she was a sad case'. And, um, we can come back to that later. But thinking back to the first phrase you used, you said that she was 'always out of it'.**

Christy: [weakly] Yeah.

Interviewer: [Step two: *Exploring the story*] **Can you**

think of a particular time when your mother was 'out of it'?

Christy: Uhh [sighing] Well I mean, uh, yeah, ... Well I mean an example of that would be, right, when Frank – her boyfriend Frank – [meekly], well, he did some bad things to me, and she wasn't around, she was never around, never, never, never. It does me head in now to think about it, and anyway I've talked about this loads with the health visitor and, and how that screwed me up with boyfriends, and – the health visitor understands. And then there's the others, they say to me, [mocking] 'You can't

spend your life blaming your mother.' Who am I supposed to believe? I mean you probably think I'm just like my Mum as well, don't you? I even know the term for it – it's a cycle? Yeah, is that it? It's a cycle? We did this at the children's centre, and that's when I told the whole group about Frank and his creepy hands and after Marianne at the children's centre she said, my childhood was the worst she'd ever heard of, and, and I've got the scars to – prove it. I mean ... look at that. [Christy slowly pulls up the sleeve of her cardigan to reveal scars on the inside of her arm.] What do you think about that?

Interview transcript – Christy, second interview

Interviewer: [Step three: *Accessing hidden parts of the story, by finding a source of strength*] **Christy, I noticed earlier that you mentioned Auntie Lizzie and the fact that you wished that she'd been your mum. Um, you said that you and your brother and sister stayed with her for awhile when you were nine.**

Christy: Yeah.

Interviewer: [Step three: *Accessing hidden parts of the story, by finding a source of strength*] **So I wonder what Auntie Lizzie offered you that made you feel 'good inside' as you put it.**

Christy: God, I never really thought about – [sighs] It was just different. [Christy pauses and looks around the room. She sees some books on a shelf.] ... Oh, I remember ... books....she, she used to read to me, just to me after me brother and sister had fallen asleep. [She smiles at the memory.] ... My light would stay on, and Auntie Lizzie would sit on a chair by the bed and she'd lean over and read, and she'd let me turn the pages. I'd say, 'Don't turn it yet! Turn it now!' Do you know what I mean? And I was always was full of questions. There was one story, [sighs] there was one story about the child that got lost. [She bites her fingernails.] I got, I got really scared but Lizzie just sat

holding my hand and she said, she said, 'Sometimes it's OK to be scared.' But she's the only person I have ever trusted.

Interviewer: **Well let's think about this issue of trust. It – it sounds like you were able to show Auntie Lizzie what you were really feeling. And I know that sometimes you haven't felt able to share that with some of the professionals you've talked to.**

Christy: Definitely. [slight smile and laugh]

Interviewer: [Step five: *Naming the process – in the here and now*] **And sometimes you've even got into fights with them and I know you've said that was when you felt that you couldn't trust them and that they weren't as good as Auntie Lizzie. And I wonder how much you feel you can trust me while we're working together on this assessment.**

Christy: [sighs] I don't, you know. Trust's a big deal for me and sometimes fighting just seems like the only way. But look where it's got me. I know all that stuff in me head but sometimes I just – I just can't help meself. [Exasperated] And I still worry I'm going to pass all this on – like I'm going to pass this on to my children like my mother did to me. [Pleading] So do you think there is any way out for me?

Interviewer: [Step four: *Revising the story, by prompting/developing reflection on multiple perspectives, especially her daughters*] **I can see you're very concerned about how this might be affecting your children. So let's think about that. How do you think it affects your kids to see you and Craig hitting each other?**

Christy: [complaining] It's not like that all the time. That's not all they see. It, it's – Craig's good for me most of the time, and I, I don't, you know, I don't fly off the handle for no good reason.

Interviewer: [Step four: *Revising, as above*] **Okay, but what's your understanding of why there are concerns about you and your children?**

Christy: Well, it's all the arguing me and Craig do, yeah. And probably the scary things that I tell the health visitor and 'cause I keep falling out with all those people. .. Sometimes I just think they can't handle me.

Interviewer: [Step four: *Revising, by prompting reflection about the connections between past and present*] **Sounds like you're really worried that you might be repeating some of the patterns that went on between you and your mum, in your relationship with Craig and, perhaps more importantly, with your kids. So if you were to think back to what was it like for you as a child, when your**

mum kept falling in and out of relationships with different men...

Christy: [thoughtful] Look at these [slowly pulls up cardigan and shows the scars] – yeah. Just look at 'em. What kind of message is that sending out to my kids? I just want to give 'em something better than I had. That's the least they deserve. But right now, I – do you know, right now I feel like I'm a million, million miles from there. [crying] And seriously, all I'm afraid of is that I'm gonna, I'm gonna get into a fight with someone like you and, and, .. and I'm gonna get my kids taken off me.

Interviewer: [Step four: *Revising, by offering a reflective summary that also offers Christy the opportunity to make a choice towards a positive future*] **I can see this is really tough for you, Christy, and it must have taken a lot of courage to be so honest about all this and how it's affecting your kids. You know, it seems to me like this is a real fork in the road for you, and you're either going to repeat the patterns that you know, and you're going to be fighting for your kids for the rest of your life. Or you could make the choice to take a different path to your Mum, and be the parent that you think your kids really deserve.**

Christy: ... I know you're right. But can I do it? It's hard. It's really hard.

Christy's second interview – Commentary

When Christy talks about her foster mother, 'Auntie Lizzie', a trusted and comforting person from her childhood who still keeps in touch and offers her encouragement, she becomes calm and contained. This enables her to recount and re-live a moment of real attunement and closeness – the bedtime story – and then to share her real feelings of fear about the story and then her pleasure in receiving comfort from Auntie Lizzie. Christy's rambling speech pattern has gone, she is no longer involved in a push-pull with the interviewer, and she is at last reflecting on her own real feelings. Thus we see that, underneath the presentation of her exaggerated feelings in the earlier interview, lie Christy's authentic feelings of fear. For Christy to reflect on these authentic feelings is progress. She has also been able to recall an episode fixed in time and place. It may also be useful to compare how she uses the scars on her arms the first and second time: the first time is to shock and invite concern from the interviewer, and the second time is as a cue for considering the effects of her self-harming on her children. In other words, Christy is starting to really think about the perspectives of other people – in this instance, her children.

Further work

- What further questions would you ask Christy? What would help her to become internally stronger and more resilient?
- How could you use the LEARN Model to help Christy resolve the abuse she suffered as a child, leaving in the past what needs to be left in the past, and taking forward into the future what she needs to protect herself and her children?
- How could you use the LEARN Model to encourage Christy to think about her parenting style, the effects of her behaviour on her children, and what might need to change in order for her children to be safe?
- How could you use the LEARN Model to help Christy think about her relationship with Craig, what patterns it might be repeating, and how it impacts on her children?
- Given how difficult Christy finds it to organise her thoughts in terms of time, place, sequence, etc., what other methods might help her develop a more coherent story about her life or appreciate the impact of her behaviour on her children? For example, externalising methods such as drawing, using objects, or creating time lines.
- How could you use the LEARN Model to help Christy think about the pattern of her relationships with professionals and how she might develop a more collaborative way of working with them? (For example, you may have noticed

how, during the second of Christy's interviews presented here, the interviewer focuses on the issue of trust and invites Christy to reflect on how this might affect their working relationship. This direct focus on the 'here and now' process encourages the first moment of genuine reflection in Christy, as she contemplates the impact of her pattern of responses on herself and her children. By using all of the steps of the LEARN Model, including *naming the process*, the social worker helps Christy to move from being an 'adversary' to becoming a 'customer' – ie. a person who understands she has something to gain and is an active part of the process.)

- How important do you think it is for Christy to have continuity among the professionals engaging with her? Why?



Activity: Bells that rang

1. Does Christy remind you of any of your current clients?
2. If so, what speech patterns or discourse markers are similar?
3. What other speech patterns/discourse markers do you notice with your client? (You may wish to refer to the discourse marking sheet or the *Interviewing Guide*.)
4. What areas would be helpful to explore in more depth with your client in order to understand their attachment strategy more fully?
5. What questions might be helpful? (You may wish to refer to the *Interviewing Guide*.)
6. What are the implications of your client's attachment patterns for the client, and for anyone that she or he cares for?
7. What do the attachment patterns you have identified suggest about your client's approach to relationships, and in particular their responses when they feel threatened in any way?
8. Who else is involved with or has information about your client that it would be helpful to talk with?
9. What do you notice about your own responses to this client? For instance, do you find yourself mirroring their patterns in any way? If so, what might this be about? Does your client's story or manner of communicating ring any bells – or press any 'hot buttons' – for you? How can you manage this?