

# **The Vulnerable Child**

## **Introduction**

*Is there a vulnerable child in this family?*

In a 1999 publication, the National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment said that child vulnerability refers to a child's capacity for self-protection. This definition helps to challenge the tendency (and naïve mistake) leading to associating vulnerability primarily with age, but it leaves us with the need for more detail if we are to understand and assess self-protection.

## **The First Safety Assessment**

Child vulnerability is the first conclusion you make when completing a safety assessment. If you can conclude that there is not a vulnerable child in the family/household, then no safety problem exists; no further safety assessment is necessary; and no safety plan will be required. When you determine that a vulnerable child lives in the family/household, then you proceed to complete your safety assessment.

Keep this in mind. Safety is an issue only when there is a vulnerable child in a family.

## **An Important Judgment**

***This is not an incidental matter.*** The topic of a child's vulnerability is a long standing and highly recognized concern in all of CPS intervention. It is such a common concept in our work that it would be easy to underestimate its significance and the need for focus and attention as a safety assessment issue. Certainly, we have to watch out for over simplifying how we think about and apply child vulnerability as a decision-making concept.

## **Judging Child Vulnerability**

In order to judge child vulnerability, you will need to gather sufficient information to evaluate the child, understand the place the child has in the family, have a sense of the parent - child interaction and be observant of particular family conditions or influences that shape the child's vulnerability. Note: This means that while the vulnerability of some children is obvious simply by observation (e.g., an infant), judging and concluding about the vulnerability of lots of children depends on you having a pretty good understanding of the child and the family. It may be that often you are not in a position to be certain about the question of child vulnerability until the conclusion of your investigation (i.e., initial assessment/full information collection). That is one reason that, in addition to other times, a safety assessment should always be completed at the conclusion of the investigation/initial assessment.

The definition for child vulnerability that you just read says vulnerability is all about self-protection. So, what does that mean to you? Can a child provide for their basic needs? Can a child defend him/herself against a physical assault? Can a child get away from a dangerous situation? For that matter, does a child even know when a dangerous situation is developing? Is a child totally dependent on others? These are questions that provide some boundaries to the idea of self-protection. However, we can be clearer. Look at the following things that help us judge child vulnerability.

**Age** - Children from birth to six years old are always vulnerable. Be hyper-vigilant about infants.

**Physical Disability** - Regardless of age, children who are physically handicapped and therefore unable to remove themselves from danger are vulnerable. Those who, because of their physical limitations, are highly dependent on others to meet their basic needs are vulnerable.

***Mental Disability*** - Regardless of age, children who are cognitively limited are vulnerable because of a number of possible limitations: recognizing danger, knowing who can be trusted, meeting their basic needs and seeking protection.

***Provocative*** - A child's emotional, mental health, behavioral problems can be such that they irritate and provoke others to act out toward them or to avoid them totally.

***Powerless*** - Regardless of age, intellect and physical capacity, children who are highly dependent and susceptible to others are vulnerable. These children typically are so influenced by emotional and psychological attachment that they are subject to the whims of those who have power over them. Within this dynamic, you might notice children being subject to intimidation, fear and emotional manipulation. Finally, remember that powerlessness could also be observed in vulnerable children who are exposed to threatening circumstances, which they are unable to manage.

***Defenseless*** - Regardless of age, a child who is unable to defend him/herself against aggression is vulnerable. This can include those children who are oblivious to danger. Remember that self-protection involves accurate reality perception particularly related to dangerous people and dangerous situations. Children who are frail or lack mobility are more defenseless and therefore vulnerable.

***Non-Assertive*** - Regardless of age, a child who is so passive or withdrawn not to be able to make his or her basic needs known is vulnerable. A child who cannot or will not seek help and protection from others is vulnerable.

***Illness*** - Regardless of age, some children have continuing or acute medical problems and needs that make them vulnerable.

***Invisible*** - Seems silly, right? Take some time to think about that. Children that no one sees (who are hidden) are vulnerable. Why would caregivers keep a child isolated from others? A child who is not visible to be noticed and observed should be considered vulnerable regardless of age.

## **Summary**

- Child vulnerability is the first conclusion you make when completing a safety assessment
- A judgment about child vulnerability is based on the capacity for self-protection
- Self-protection refers to being able to demonstrate behavior that 1) results in defending oneself against threats of safety and 2) results in successfully meeting one's own basic (safety) needs
- Child vulnerability is not a matter of degree. Kids are vulnerable to threats to safety or they are not
- Vulnerability means being defenseless to threats of safety
- Child vulnerability is not based on age alone
- There are many characteristics of older children that make them vulnerable to threats to safety
- If there are no vulnerable children in a family/household, then no additional safety assessment or safety planning is necessary
- As a safety assessment concern, a child's vulnerability informs us about the predisposition for suffering more serious injury
- As a safety planning issue, a child's vulnerability helps inform us about what must be done to manage threats and assure protection

## **Judge Child Vulnerability for Yourself**

Take the time to watch the video below of two children who have been reported to CPS because of a lack of supervision. You decide whether the children are vulnerable. See if you can apply some of what has been provided to you in this month's article about child vulnerability. As you view the excerpt from the Smith children interview, consider the following questions.

1 - Are these children vulnerable to threats of safety?

2 - If these children are vulnerable, are there noticeable differences in what characterizes their vulnerability?

3 - What do you think about 10 year-old children caring for themselves or for others?



child at risk

You will need Windows Media Player v7 or higher to view the following video clips.

[56k Modem Version](#)

[Broadband Cable/DSL Version](#)