

When Living Conditions Seriously Endanger a Child's Physical Health

Introduction

The CPS worker stepped up on the porch and knocked on the screen door. *Whoa*, the worker thought when the smell hit her. She blinked her eyes hard and moved her hand to her nose.

"Yeah, come in," someone said from inside. The worker opened the door and stepped in. Mrs. Bellows, the subject of the CPS report, was on the couch in the corner of the room. An extremely obese woman, she seemed almost lifeless sitting there.

After determining that the person on the couch was Mrs. Bellows, the worker said, "Hi. I'm Nancy Brannigan. I work for the Department of Social Services. I'd like to speak with you about a concern that has been brought to our attention." At about that time, Nancy's mouth began to water as bile rose in her throat. The smell in the house was overwhelming. Nancy was certain she would vomit. She gathered herself, choking back the rising tide as best she could. As she proceeded with the interview, her hand lingered close to her nose as an ineffective shield against the smell.

Within a short time, Nancy excused herself and walked to her car. She called her supervisor. "We've got to remove these kids. This house is unbelievable. The smell literally knocks you down. I thought I was going to blow chunks it was so awful. There is no way these kids should be living here."

"So the kids aren't safe," the supervisor asked.

"Absolutely not," was Nancy's response.

“What’s causing the smell? Where’s it coming from?” The supervisor asked.

“The house is a mess. I mean stuff lying around everywhere. Filth. There are dishes and glasses all over the place...on tables, on the floor. Papers. Boxes. Toys. Dirty clothes. Leftover food. You name it...you have to wade through it. I didn’t even want to sit down and wouldn’t have if there hadn’t been a kitchen chair sitting in the living room. The mom is gigantic, and she just sits there; I’m not sure she even can move. She says she’s not been feeling well and hasn’t been able to clean things up. But, I mean, it’s just the worst place I’ve seen.” Nancy explained.

“But what’s causing the smell? Is it the dirty house?” The supervisor asked again.

“Yeah, I guess so. I don’t know for sure what’s causing it other than the house is a garbage dump. The mom said they’d been having trouble with the plumbing, so that’s obviously part of it. So I’m thinking we should get these kids out of here. What do you think?” Nancy said.

“Do you think the kids are in danger?” The supervisor asked.

“Well, this is just awful. I mean I’m gagging the whole time I’m talking to Mrs. Bellows.”

“So what are you thinking is the danger to the kids? How are you thinking the smell, the dirt and clutter are threatening the kids’ safety?” The supervisor continued.

“Well, it is so unpleasant...aw what am I saying? Unpleasant doesn’t even get close to it.” Nancy was exasperated.

“Tell you what...we’ve got to sort out some things. We need to know whether the conditions of the home are actually presenting a danger to the kids. We need to be certain that something specific exists there that really jeopardizes their physical health, and I mean jeopardizes their physical health as of *right now*. You’ll need to approach Mrs. Bellows again now. Ask her to either show you around or to allow you to look around the house. You should be looking for anything that you can conclude could be a direct threat to the kids. We’re not looking for unfortunate or unpleasant stuff; you’ve got to get past the smell; we’re looking for whether the condition of the house or something specific in the house is a danger. I can understand how bad the smell must be, but even the grossest smell doesn’t mean the kids aren’t safe. We need to figure out what’s causing it.”

We’ll stop the scenario there and hope that this general idea comes through: When it comes to dirty, even filthy houses, you must reconcile the existence of a real danger toward a child against your own values, experience and sensibilities.

The threat to safety that we address this month is about the living structure in which a child resides and whether something about the structure or within it directly endangers a child’s safety. Some may think that this threat ought to be one of the easier ones to assess. That’s not the case. Familiarity tells us that often family conditions are misunderstood or misjudged due to worker bias, worker experience, and/or worker values. We’ll consider this threat from a variety of perspectives.

Endangered Physical Health

The key to this threat is concerned with a serious, immediate, acute effect on a child’s physical health. We refer here to the prospect of serious physical injury, acute serious illness and life-threatening infection. The question is whether something in the child’s living environment could result in serious injury to a child or could cause a child to become seriously ill or cause a child to acquire a

serious, even life-threatening illness. This includes (but is not limited to) such things as fractures, poisoning, lacerations, poisoning, life-threatening infections, hypothermia, suffocation and burns.

Living Conditions

Living conditions refers to the total environment that comprises a child's home circumstances. So, physically we should consider the home, all that's in the home, and the property surrounding the home. Let's take a look at the kinds of things that may be in need of assessment.

Physical Structure

- Unsound or decaying walls, ceiling, floors, stairways
- Exposed or dangerous wiring, electricity, natural gas
- Ineffective, faulty heating, cooling, fireplaces, ventilation systems
- Fire traps, limited escape, no safety precautions
- Inadequate, faulty, broken plumbing including contaminated water
- Dangerous balconies; upper floor windows
- Broken windows, mirrors or other glass
- Unlocked or accessible storage areas containing dangerous items
- Inadequate, dangerous sleeping arrangements

Hygiene

- Dangerous or no cleaning habits and management
- Existence of dangerous bacteria, germs, infestation
- No or ineffective waste disposal and containment
- Unacceptable and dangerous cooking practices, food storage, food preparation and food management
- Fecal contamination
- Animal feces or ill animals – transmission of infections, parasites and worms

- Significant and uncontrolled mildew and mold
- Dirt and filth buildup sufficient to carry bacteria and viruses

Toxins

- Dangerous plants accessible to small children (Did you know that Azaleas, Buttercups and Daffodils plus a lot more plants are toxic?)
- Dangerous products accessible to children such as aerosols, bleach, chlorine, furniture polish, air fresheners, hairspray, perfume, nail polish and remover, oven cleaner, insecticides and lead

Household or Personal Items

- Accessible alcohol or drugs
- Unsecured guns and other weapons
- Accessible matches and lighters
- Faulty electrical cords
- Hot stoves and heaters
- Accessible and faulty ceiling and regular fans
- Dangerous tools or equipment

Surroundings

- Natural hazards
- Water hazards
- Traffic
- Man-made hazards
- Hazardous junk, appliances, etc. stored or abandoned outside
- Insecure or dangerous yards, walkways, walls and barriers
- Dangerous animals
- Dangerous people or neighborhood

Home Environment

- Dangerous people or activity within the home
- Drug sales or trafficking
- Drug use by outsiders (i.e., crack houses)
- Drug production
- Gang activity

Child Supervision

What is evident when considering what makes a home environment dangerous is that many of these things are common to all homes. The issue has to do with whether children have access to that which could cause serious injury, illness or death. Parental supervision is crucial when considering this threat. In fact, it is likely that a threat associated with dangerous living circumstances would often be accompanied by a threat related to a lack of supervision. So, the assessment of this threat should always consider how children are being supervised and whether acceptable supervision is sufficient to protect the children from the dangerous living circumstance within the environment.

Culture

It is crucial that culture be considered in this discussion. That which may be part of a dangerous living environment could very well be associated with a long-standing cultural practice. For instance, when developing a safety training curriculum for Native American child welfare workers, we consulted with our advisory group which was comprised of Native Americans representing different tribes. We asked them to consider whether safety threats identified on a universal safety assessment form were culturally acceptable. The single one that was identified as problematic if not properly applied was the threat concerned with dangerous living circumstances. The discussion centered on children living on reservations and the independence they were often afforded related to the

geography and lifestyle present on the reservation. Where some might consider the living circumstance dangerous, the fact is that we were discussing a lifestyle and child-rearing practice that has existed successfully for many centuries. It is crucial that CPS workers are diligent in considering child-rearing practices and living situations that are embedded in culture and actually acceptable even if they do not fit nicely within society's mainstream. That brings us to your self-awareness in general.

Worker Sensibilities

It could be argued that the majority of CPS workers' life experience and childhood and adulthood lifestyle are different than most families reported for child abuse and neglect. Typically, CPS workers—particularly newer staff—encounter living circumstances unlike anything close to their own personal experience. In our scenario, we might imagine that Nancy is an inexperienced worker with middle class values and life experiences. Her standard for what is acceptable or unsafe could very well be more a product of her own values and sensibilities than what is actually threatening to a child's safety. Her supervisor's guidance to make a direct link between what she was observing in the home and how it actually directly threatens a child's safety provides us with the realization that it is crucial to take ourselves and what is personally acceptable to us out of the equation when judging danger in a home.

Definition and Elaboration

This threat refers to conditions in the home which are immediately life threatening or seriously endangering a child's physical health (e.g., people discharging firearms without regard to who might be harmed; the lack of hygiene is so dramatic as to cause or potentially cause serious illness).

Application of the Safety Threshold Criteria

To be out of control, this safety threat includes home situations that are in some state of deterioration or environmental situations that caregivers are not able or willing to manage. The threat to a child's safety and immediate health is obvious. There is nothing within the family network that can alter the conditions that prevail in the environment. This is a critical judgment and can be qualified by asking the question, "What action can be taken immediately that will correct the threat?" For instance, when one of our staff conducted initial assessments, he responded to what was reported as a dangerous living situation due to filthy conditions. He found a house that was a squalor—totally nasty and overwhelmingly cluttered. In general, the home was no place for children to be living. However, he judged that the conditions in the house could be corrected within hours. He enlisted the parents' cooperation and together took necessary action to remedy the living conditions in that awful home which was corrected within hours. The home circumstances were not out of control. In that example, the safety threshold was not met.

The living arrangements are at the end of the continuum for deplorable and immediate danger. Vulnerable children who live in such conditions could become deathly sick, experience extreme injury, or acquire life-threatening or severe medical conditions. The severity of effects that could occur due to the living conditions must be obvious. Another of our staff once assessed a report involving a Navajo family that lived in a hogan. The ventilation in their home was decidedly poor. The report from a physician involved an infant with conjunctivitis. The problem was associated with the smoke within the hogan. Clearly the home condition was causing the child's physical problem, but it was not severe or life threatening. It was not a threat to the child's safety in the sense of severity. The parents took action to address the problem and, of course, the child's condition was treated.

The concern for imminence is critical to judging this threat. Remaining in such a dangerous environment could result in severe injuries and serious health repercussions today, this evening, or anytime. Whatever is threatening within the environment must be dealt with immediately because its effect on a child could be just as immediate. As you look back at all the things we listed as examples of dangerous things within a child's home and living environment, think of the immediate exposure the child has with any of those and the effect that could result.

Finally, the threat must be observable and specific to fit the safety threshold. In the scenario, the supervisor wanted Nancy to identify something that she could describe as it existed and could make a case for exactly how it threatened a child's safety. When encountering this threat, you must be able to provide a detailed description and explanation of what exists within the child's living environment, how it serves to endanger the child at the time you observed it, and what your judgment is about how caregivers perceive and respond to the threat.

Examples of the Threat

Here are some more examples of this threat beyond those mentioned above:

- Housing is unsanitary, filthy, infested, an immediate health hazard.
- The house's physical structure is decaying, falling down.
- Wiring and plumbing in the house are substandard, exposed so much so that the danger is obvious.
- Furnishings or appliances are hazardous.
- Heating, fireplaces, stoves are hazardous and accessible.
- There are natural or man-made hazards located close to the home.

- The home has easily accessible open windows or balconies in upper stories.
- Occupants in the home, activity within the home, or traffic in and out of the home present a specific threat to a child's safety.