

# Threats to Child Safety

## Introduction

If you've been following our monthly articles, you may remember that in January we defined safety as including the threat of danger. It is crucial that CPS practitioners fully understand this concept of threat of danger. In that January article, we defined threat of danger this way:

*A threat of danger is a specific family situation or behavior, emotion, motive, perception or capacity of a family member that is out-of-control, imminent and likely to have severe effects on a vulnerable child.*

A threat of danger has four specific characteristics:

1. A threat of danger is specific and observable.
2. A threat of danger is out-of-control.
3. A threat of danger is certain to happen in the present or near future (i.e., next several days.).
4. A threat of danger is likely to have severe effects.

March's article is devoted to understanding *threat of danger*. This concept is the cornerstone of child safety intervention.

## A Brief History

The history concerned with child safety intervention is not very long. The first formal safety intervention model was created in 1986. We at ACTION designed and tested that first model in Annapolis, Maryland. It worked! The design set forth a *Child Safety Assessment – Decision Making Process*. It went like this:

- a. Collect sufficient, relevant information on which to base the safety assessment.
- b. Using standardized criteria, identify the behaviors/ conditions present in the family that will likely jeopardize a child's safety.
- c. Identify strengths within the family that may offset the negative safety influences.
- d. Arrive at a determination regarding whether the child is unsafe.
- e. Determine which safety management alternatives match specific client conditions and thus control for a child's safety.

Notice item b. That refers to threats of danger. So, fifteen years ago was the benchmark for establishing standardized criteria related to assessing child safety. That was the first time a list of threats of danger appeared in the field. Back then, we called threats of danger safety influences. Others since then have called threats of danger safety concerns, safety factors, threats of serious harm and so forth. Perhaps in your agency you have a label for threats of danger like one of these. In recent years, we decided to use the term threats of danger because in our opinion "danger" better represents the threshold applicable to the unsafe child.

Within the past five years, there has been a lot development of child safety models nationally. Eighty percent of the states now have safety models. In addition – all safety models have standardized criteria for assessing safety. All safety models have a list of threats of danger.

### **Threats of Danger**

Through the years, the hard work of professionals across the country has resulted in a common set of threats of danger. This should feel reassuring to you

to know that when it comes to assessing for child safety the possibilities are not limitless. We have examined all the safety models currently in use and have found that a core set of threats of danger exist. There are ten threats of danger that are apparent in all models. While the descriptions might be different, you likely can find these in the safety model your state uses.

- Violent Caregivers or Others in the Household
- Caregiver Makes Child Inaccessible
- Caregiver Lack of Self Control
- Caregiver Has Distorted Perception of a Child
- Caregiver Fails to Supervise/Protect
- Caregiver Threatened/Caused Serious Physical Harm to a Child
- Caregiver Will Not/Cannot Explain a Child's Injuries
- Child Provokes Maltreatment
- Fearful Child
- Caregiver Is Unwilling/Unable to Meet Immediate Needs of Child

The vast majority of safety models contain no less than ten threats of danger and no more than twenty. The difference among models in terms of numbers of threats of danger is primarily related to editorial preference or an interest to address some case specific circumstance within the state (often influenced by high profile cases.) Differences between models are less substantive than individualized.

We think it is important that CPS practitioners understand that while safety models in different places may appear to be different, fundamentally they are the same. Criteria used in safety assessment is well established and widely accepted.

## **The Manifestation of Threats of Danger**

Our definition for threats of danger indicates that threats are family conditions that are *specific and observable*. A threat of danger is something you see or learn about from credible sources. Threats of danger can be described to you or by others who know a family. Threats of danger are real; these dangerous family conditions can be observed and understood. Here's a rule for you. If you cannot describe in detail a family condition that is a threat to a child's safety that you've seen or been told about then that's an indication that it is not a threat of danger. This may seem obvious to you but remember that families have many problems in their lives that do not result in danger to a child. If this is confusing to you look again at our January article describing the differences between risk and safety.

It may occur to you that the threats of danger in your state's safety model are not very specific. That's true of most all models. The reason is that standardized criteria for safety assessment cannot be written sufficiently specific to cover the huge number of family conditions or case situations you are likely to encounter. But this is not a problem. The expectation of all safety assessment approaches is that the criteria serves to prompt the assessment and record the judgment, which is followed by a requirement that the CPS practitioner provide a detailed description of what the family condition, is that matches the criteria and how it is a threat of danger. How is that done? To determine if a family condition is a threat of danger consistent with the safety criteria in your state's model, you should be able to:

- Identify the behavior, motive, attitude, emotion, perception, lack of capacity or family situation that is out of control. This is the threat of danger.
- Describe the threat of danger in detail.
- Indicate how the behavior, motive, attitude, emotion, perception, lack of capacity or family condition is dangerous to a child.

- Determine the duration of the threat of danger.
- Describe how and when the threat of danger occurs.
- Determine the frequency of the threat of danger.
- Describe the circumstances that prevail when the threat of danger is active.
- Describe anything that stimulates or influences the threat of danger. .

Your agency policy may require that you document all the above. However, whether you have to or not as a professional, you should know and be able to explain fully what you are observing for two reasons: 1) to be certain that what is occurring in a family is actually a threat of danger justifying protective action and 2) to understand what it will take to provide protection.

Threats of danger are manifested differently. Threats of danger may occur as present danger or impending danger.

**Present danger** exists at the highest safety threshold. Present danger is also the easiest to detect. Why? Because it is totally transparent and happening right in front of you. Present danger is an immediate, significant and clearly observable threat to a child occurring in the present. Threats of danger that are consistent with the present danger threshold include things like:

- Hitting, beating, severely depriving now
- Injuries to the face and head
- Premeditated maltreatment
- Life threatening living arrangements
- Bizarre cruelty toward a child
- Bizarre/extreme viewpoint of a child
- Vulnerable children who are left unsupervised or alone now
- Child extremely afraid of home situation
- Child needing immediate medical care
- Caregiver unable to provide basic care

- Caregiver exhibiting bizarre behavior
- Caregiver who is out of control now
- Caregiver under the influence of substances now
- Caregiver cannot/will not explain child's serious injuries
- Family will flee or hides child

**Present danger requires immediate protective intervention.** Would you agree that if you walked into someone's house any of these family conditions would be easily detected? You do not need a lot of information to know something must be done. When you see present danger you should stop whatever else it is you are doing (like proceeding with your initial assessment) and begin the process of assuring the child is protected. Once a child is protected, you resume information collection to better understand the family context within which present danger occurred.

Safety models require CPS practitioners to assess safety when they first encounter a family and may expect specific assessment again within a day to five days. In terms of mandating reassessing threats, some safety models stop after the five day standard, which is a mistake. The reason is that threats of danger can manifest as impending danger.

**Impending danger** refers to threatening family conditions that are not obvious or active or occurring when you first show up but are out of control and likely to have a severe effect on a child in the near future (which is any time during the next several days.) In CPS, family members are reluctant to reveal themselves, to disclose what is happening within the family. If something is not happening before your eyes like present danger threats, it will take time and effort to understand individual and family dynamics. By conducting effective initial assessments, impending danger can be exposed and understood. Your ability to explain the specifics of what you've observed as a threat of danger requires a full and effective study of the family. This is how you identify impending danger.

Therefore, some safety models require CPS practitioners to complete a safety assessment at the conclusion of the initial assessment in order to confirm impending danger and to establish safety management plans to assure protection.

In order to make the ideas of present and impending danger a bit more clear and real, take a look at the following case scenario.

### **The Chavez Family**

*CPS received a report from law enforcement regarding Laura Chavez and her 8-year-old daughter Jennae. Laura over-dosed in front of her daughter. The mom and daughter were transported to the hospital where they are now. The child is in present danger. The threatening family condition (i.e., no responsible adult to care for the child) exists in the present. Immediate protective intervention is necessary. But does impending danger exist? The day this happened the need to protect Jennae supersedes information collection to evaluate impending danger. In fact, Laura is non-communicative. Here you can see that present danger could exist but subsequent information collection could determine that impending danger does not exist because of what reveals and explains Laura's over-dose and/or protective capacity within the family.*

*The initial assessment proceeds the day following Laura's hospitalization and protective intervention for Jennae. The CPS initial assessment caseworker interviews Jennae, Laura, Laura's sister Christine, the maternal grandparents, Laura some more and maybe some other people who know the family.*

*Laura's history includes serious regrets over having given up a child for adoption, a violent marriage, the death of her husband*

*two years earlier and increasing difficulties with depression and despair. Laura drinks regularly frequently mixed with prescription drugs. She often sleeps or passes out during the day while Jennae is home. Jennae is left unsupervised several times a week. Jennae is developing caretaking behavior toward her mother but also shows anxiety and loneliness. There is a clear worsening progression to Laura's condition. While much more is discovered, there is enough here to see that impending danger exists. The over-dose exists within a pattern, which is worsening. Jennae is living in a family often absent a protective adult. Going back to our list of threats of danger we find caregiver is out of control (Laura's mental health issues) and caregiver fails to supervise/protect (Laura is incapacitated due to substance abuse several times weekly.)*

It is possible that a case like this could be reported for the mother's lack of care and no over-dose occurred. You might show up and Laura might be totally sober and seem appropriate. You would see no present danger. You might not identify any safety issues at the first encounter or maybe after a few contacts. However, your diligent information collection would uncover Laura's history and current functioning enabling you to identify impending danger during or by the end of your initial assessment.

## **Summary**

Agreement is widespread that threats of danger (no matter what they are called) are the foundation from which all safety intervention operates. Our hope is that this month's article has provided you with greater confidence in employing this concept to understand the safety needs of children and your role in child protection.

Please think of these questions as a summary of what we've covered. If possible, we encourage you to share in a discussion with your colleagues about how you see the answers to these questions.

- 1) Within families you evaluate, can you isolate family conditions that are out of control, certain to have an effect in upcoming days and likely to have severe results?
- 2) If your state has a safety model, can you find the ten threats of danger that we think are common to all models?
- 3) If called on to do so, can you make a case for the existence of threats of danger in a family with an explanation that is based on what we've suggested here?
- 4) Can you explain the differences between present and impending danger?
- 5) Is it possible for present danger to exist in a family but impending danger does not? Is it possible for present danger not to exist in a family while impending danger does?