

The Foundation of Safety Assessment

Information is the foundation of safety assessment.

What information do you gather and analyze in order to determine if a child is unsafe? Do you have a clear sense about what information you need in order to draw conclusions about a child's safety?

There are 10 standardized safety threats common to all safety models. Within safety assessment, standardized safety threats represent your conclusion about child safety. That conclusion is based on your understanding of a family gained from **the information you've collected.**

The effectiveness of your safety assessments is totally dependent on:

1. Whether information you've collected is pertinent to understanding threats to child safety.
2. Whether you have enough information to have confidence about child safety.

Isn't It Obvious?

Occasionally when conducting training about child safety intervention, participants comment to us that recognizing threats to safety is not difficult. They say, "We do it all the time." This is not an uncommon point of view. A while back when we were debriefing a statewide evaluation of child safety intervention by CPS, a newspaper reporter challenged us with, "Being able to detect a problem with a child's safety is no big deal. If a child is not safe, it's obvious. You child welfare people make this more difficult than it is."

In our March article about threats to safety, we emphasized the difference between present danger and impending danger. People who believe that threats to child safety are obvious may be thinking about present danger.

Present danger is an immediate, significant and clearly observable threat to a child occurring in the present.

You don't need much information at all to identify present danger. It is transparent and usually immediately understood. It's like a toddler standing in the middle of a busy intersection. Therefore, present danger certainly fits with what the newspaper reporter thought and even with what some in child welfare think.

But...much of what constitutes danger to a child is not obvious. We've referred to that as impending danger.

Impending danger refers to threatening family conditions that are not obvious or active or occurring in your presence but are out of control and likely to have a severe effect on a child in the near future.

Impending danger can be elusive. To uncover and understand impending danger you must develop a deeper familiarity with a family. To effectively assess impending danger you must inquire into pertinent areas of family life and do so in an abundant fashion with due respect for the constraints and realities of CPS work.

Six Questions

There are six areas of family life that can provide pertinent and sufficient information to complete an effective assessment of threats to child safety. Based on 15 years of field experience related to safety decision making, we know that these six areas can effectively provide sufficient information for completing safety

assessments. We've chosen to consider these six areas in the form of questions. The six questions are:

1. What is the extent of the maltreatment?
2. What surrounding circumstances accompany the maltreatment?
3. How does the child function on a daily basis?
4. What are the disciplinary approaches and typical context used by the caregiver?
5. What are the overall, pervasive parenting practices used by the caregiver?
6. How does the caregiver function with respect to daily life management and general adaptation including substance use and mental health functioning?

These six questions are not for the family to answer but are for you. These six questions provide the boundaries for what you seek to understand about a family. The answers to these six questions provide the data foundation from which you identify the presence of threats to child safety.

What is the extent of the maltreatment?

This question is concerned with the maltreating behavior and the immediate physical effects on a child. It considers what is occurring or has occurred and what the results are (e.g. hitting, injuries.) The answer to this question also results in a finding of maltreatment (as in a substantiation of the alleged maltreatment.) This question is typically the focus of most investigations. So, it is very important. However, relying only on information from this question is inadequate for assessing safety.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Type of maltreatment
- Severity of the maltreatment
- History of the maltreatment
- Description of specific events
- Description of emotional and physical symptoms
- Identification of the child and maltreating caregiver

What surrounding circumstances accompany the maltreatment?

This question is concerned with the nature of what accompanies or surrounds the maltreatment. It addresses what is going on at the time that the maltreatment occurs or has occurred. It serves to qualify the nature of the maltreatment.

Information that answers this question includes:

- The duration of the maltreatment
- Caregiver intent concerning the maltreatment
- Caregiver explanation for the maltreatment and family conditions
- Caregiver acknowledgement and attitude about the maltreatment
- Other problems occurring in association with the maltreatment (like substance use or mental disturbance)

How does the child function on a daily basis?

This question is concerned with a child's general behavior, emotions, temperament and physical capacity. It addresses how a child is from day to day rather than focusing on points in time (i.e., CPS contact, time of the

maltreatment event.) A developmentally appropriate standard is applied in this area of inquiry.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Capacity for attachment
- General mood and temperament
- Intellectual functioning
- Communication and social skills
- Expressions of emotions/feelings
- Behavior
- Peer relations
- School performance
- Independence
- Motor skills
- Physical and mental health
- Functioning within cultural norms

What are the disciplinary approaches and typical context used by the caregiver?

This question is concerned with the manner in which caregivers approach discipline and child guidance. Discipline is considered in the broader context of socialization – teaching and guiding the child. This question is broken out from parenting generally because we found that this aspect of family life is highly related to both risk of maltreatment and threats to child safety.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Disciplinary methods
- Concept and purpose of discipline

- Context in which discipline occurs
- Cultural practices

What are the overall, pervasive parenting practices used by the caregiver?

This question explores the general nature and approach to parenting which forms a basis for understanding caregiver-child interaction in more substantive ways.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Reasons for being a caregiver
- Satisfaction in being a caregiver
- Caregiver knowledge and skill in parenting and child development
- Caregiver expectations and empathy for a child
- Decision making in parenting practices
- Parenting style
- History of parenting behavior
- Protectiveness

How does the caregiver function with respect to daily life management and general adaptation including substance use and mental health functioning?

This question is concerned with how the adults/caregivers in the family feel, think and act on a daily basis. The question here focuses on adult functioning separate from parenting. For instance, here we are concerned with how these adults in the family behave regardless of whether they are parents or not.

Information that answers this question includes:

- Communication and social skills
- Coping and stress management
- Self control
- Problem solving
- Judgment and decision making
- Independence
- Home and financial management
- Employment
- Citizenship and community involvement
- Rationality
- Self care and self preservation
- Substance use
- Mental health
- Physical health and capacity
- Functioning within cultural norms

Experience has confirmed repeatedly that the information related to these six questions can be effectively gathered by CPS staff using acceptable interviewing approaches during initial assessment/investigation. While we acknowledge variation in the ease of getting information from families, we know that usually you can gather pertinent and sufficient information related to these six questions from one to a few family contacts.

Relationship of the Six Assessment Questions to Threats to Safety

The following table shows the relationship of the six questions to informing about specific threats to child safety. The table uses the 10 safety threats that are contained (in some language) within every safety intervention model. The table shows matches questions to the different safety threats.

As you look at the table, you notice that different assessment questions can relate to a single safety threat. For instance, notice that you can learn about a caregiver's lack of control by considering how the person functions as an adult generally and how the person functions specifically with respect to disciplinary practices.

Table 1

Information – Assessment Questions	Related Safety Threat
1. What is the extent of maltreatment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caregiver threatened/caused serious physical harm to a child.
2. What circumstances surround the maltreatment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caregiver cannot/will not explain a child's injuries. ○ Child provokes maltreatment.
3. How does the child function on a daily basis?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Child is fearful. ○ Child provokes maltreatment.
4. What are the disciplinary practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Violent caregivers or others in the household. ○ Caregiver lack of self control.
5. What are the general parenting practices?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caregiver makes child inaccessible. ○ Caregiver has distorted perception of a child. ○ Caregiver fails to protect/supervise. ○ Caregiver is unwilling/unable to meet immediate needs of child.
6. How does the adult/caregiver function with respect to daily life management and general adaptation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Violent caregivers or others in the household. ○ Caregiver lack of self control. ○ Caregiver is unwilling/unable to meet immediate needs of child.