

Violence

Introduction

Violence occurring in a home where vulnerable children live is always a threat to child safety. Violence includes domestic violence occurring between adult caregivers but also encompasses other acts of violence toward those living in the household. This refers to anyone – adults or children – who live in or have occasion to frequent the household and while there act out in violent ways.

Every approach to safety assessment across the country contains a safety threat called the *parent (or caregiver) is violent*. Sometimes safety assessment models include being *out of control* with violence. In that instance the safety threat would be stated as *a parent who is out of control and/or violent*.

In addition to the violence safety threat, some models also identify a safety threat specifically related to domestic violence. In one safety model, the threat is expressed as *domestic violence exists in the home and places the child in danger of physical and/or emotional harm*. Another model considers domestic violence from a different perspective: *The caretaker may be a victim of domestic violence, which affects the caretaker's ability to care for and/or protect the child from imminent, moderate to severe harm*.

Violence and Child Safety

The definition of violence is consistent with a threat to child safety.

Violence is a physical force used to physically injure; damage or destroy!

Such extreme, intense roughness of action meets the safety threshold – severe harm. When there is a vulnerable child in a home, violence is always a threat to child safety.

Child safety in this series of articles is defined as:

A child can be considered safe when there is no threat of danger to a child within the family/home or when the protective capacities within the home can manage threats of danger.

This definition points out, indeed underscores, the fact that while violence within a home is always a threat to child safety it does not mean that a child is unsafe. If there is a responsible adult in the home that possesses sufficient *protective capacities* to manage the violence then the child can be considered safe. Acting out behavior occurring within the home must be evaluated to determine if it is consistent with the level of force and intention of violence. At the same time, protective capacities must be assessed to determine if sufficient behavioral, emotional and cognitive responses can be mobilized by a responsible, motivated adult within the family to ward off, redirect or diminish the violence and its potential effects.

Violence as a threat to child safety must be thought of in a different manner than other safety threats. **Violence, as a threat to child safety, must be thought of in terms of dynamic occurrence.** Think about violence as existing within a process of family interaction. Violence should not be thought of as isolated acts or events when assessing for child safety. Violence is dynamic. It may be inactive. The dynamic nature of violence requires us to understand that as a behavior it is vigorous, self-motivating, self-nurturing (it feeds off itself), and forceful. Its dangerous potentiality is always lurking and present. If we get too focused on violence occurring as unrelated acts we surely will miss its insidious nature – a danger ready to happen.

With respect to child safety, violence should be understood in accordance with the severity threshold including characteristics of the behavior, frequency and kinds of acts; associated circumstances and influences; and apparent targets.

The Roots of Violence

There are many ideas and beliefs about the origin and causes of a violent behavior. Information about the cause of violence is available in abundance with respect to the human species generally and domestic violence specifically. As a part of being a competent professional CPS staff should be knowledgeable of the research and literature that exists in this area. However, with respect to safety intervention you do not assess for the cause of violence. It is not necessary to know the underlying explanations and unmet needs that result in violent behavior. While a personal philosophy or belief system about violence is well and good, it is not required for effective safety intervention. **The point is this: Child safety intervention is focused on managing and controlling violent behavior that poses a child safety threat – not understanding the cause of violence or changing it.** Think about the difference between the objective of safety intervention and treatment intervention. (For a more detailed discussion of safety intervention and treatment, please refer to the January, 2003, article “The Differences Between Risk and Safety”.)

During the course of safety intervention, violence is generally identified as it is occurring or through information collection and analysis that gives evidence to its presence in family life. Once the safety threat is identified, it must be analyzed to understand fully the manifestation of the violence with respect to progression, frequency, influences, and so forth. Safety intervention proceeds to establish safety plans that match up with and control the violence. (An upcoming article will be devoted to analyzing safety threats and the sufficiency of safety plans.)

Present and Impending Danger

Violence is always a threat to safety but is it a present or impending danger? It's good to be reminded of what is meant by present danger and impending danger. (For a more detailed discussion of impending danger, please refer to the March, 2003 article "Threats To Child Safety.")

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

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.) You have to learn more about what is happening in the family to judge impending danger.

Seldom does CPS show up at a home where violent acting-out behavior is in progress. When that does occur, it is easy to know that a present danger exists. More likely CPS has reported information that violence may be occurring in a home or may begin to suspect it after beginning the initial assessment. In either event, you are challenged to collect data that reconciles reported information or reveals the violent dynamic that pervades family life.

Violence is usually revealed as an impending danger based on study and a thorough understanding of the family. It may take several visits with the family, a few days to weeks to come to understand fully the presence and nature of violence in a family. Once you have concluded that violence is a dynamic within a family, safety management must occur immediately! Why is that?

- Violence operates within a process inherent in family life more so than an event or unrelated act.

- Once you've confirmed that violence exists within the family, it is reasonable to expect that an explosive or violent event could be unleashed anytime. That prospect requires an immediate safety management response.

CPS Examples of Violence

- Physical and verbal assault on a person in the home (in the presence of the child)
- Assaulting a child
- Adults fighting; a child intervenes or is caught in the middle
- Physically reactive
- Impulsive acting out
- Throwing things; damaging objects
- Physical aggression
- Temper outbursts; loss of control; leading to physical acting out
- Physical and emotional terrorism
- Adults whose behavior outside the home (e.g., criminal activity; drugs, violence, hostile conflict) creates an environment within the home, which threatens child safety (e.g., drug parties, gangs, drive by shootings).
- Domestic violence consistent with safety threshold described so far.

Domestic Violence

In a safety intervention, what as been stated about violence applies to domestic violence as well. In cases involving domestic violence the same severity – safety threshold standard is applied to understand the sort of domestic violence is a threat to child safety. It is important to emphasize here another dynamic that has special meaning in domestic violence situations. Acts occurring in domestic violence are not random or spontaneous. The violence in domestic violence is the unjust or callous use of force or power to control and to violate independence,

rights and sensibilities. Consider this dynamic in the context of the safety concept *imminence*. Power and control are compelling motivators that ensure the probability and imminence of the violence. Remember imminence refers to the certainty that 1) a threat will become active 2) within the near future. *It's going to happen and soon.*

Domestic violence is a family issue that presents a huge challenge for child welfare. It is controversial with respect to the question of appropriate intervention. This controversy includes safety intervention and is centrally concerned with how CPS responds to the adult victim of domestic violence. A mother who has been beaten has been victimized once. If CPS intervention results in the removal of her child or children in order to protect them, she has been victimized a second time. The challenge for CPS is to work vigorously to involve the mother in planning safety management of her children and herself.

What is a reasonable CPS position to take during safety intervention in a case involving domestic violence when the adult victim is unable or unwilling to involve herself with CPS and others to protect the children? The longstanding principle that governs safety management in any case situation including domestic violence is *the best interest of the child*. The challenge is to implement a safety intervention process that incorporates the domestic violence victim into the decisions and action that assure the best interest of the child – the child's safety.

The child safety definition guides you:

1. to identify and understand the presence of threats to safety
2. to assess caregiver protective capacities
3. to implement safety management actions to compensate for diminished protective capacities to assure children are protected; safe

Violent people in a home are the source of the threat to child safety. Their extreme behaviors and actions remove them for consideration with respect to protective capacity. Violent people are not considered a resource for protection. The protective capacities of the non-violent adult in the home are assessed. In domestic violence cases, this is usually the victim unless there is another non-violent adult caregiver residing in the household.

Do not take lightly the assessment of the protective capacities of a victim of domestic violence. A superficial assessment might conclude that since the adult is being victimized, she lacks sufficient capacity to protect herself and therefore is deficient in capacity to protect the child. (For a more detailed discussion of protective capacities, please refer to the July, 2003, article “Protective Capacities.”) There are many qualities and characteristics that make a person protective of a child. Being physically robust and able to physically protect yourself and your children is only one. Be sure to evaluate carefully the domestic violence victim’s protective capacities. Think about this. Is it not possible that personally being the recipient of the violence (taking the hits) could be an example in some instances of the demonstration of a protective capacity?

While the victim of domestic violence may not have sufficient physical strength and size to manage the violence, you may find that she possesses all the emotional protective capacities one looks for. She may be smart, alert and cognizant of the dangers. She may be able to participate effectively in problem solving and planning related to managing the threat. She may be able to take action on her own or through the support of you or others.

As you explore the presence and strength of a victim’s protective capacity, you become informed about how she participates in thinking about and arriving at a safety management plan. You will learn about her independence, alliances, fears and motivation, which may limit or expand her role in the safety plan. In all instances of domestic violence threatening child safety, CPS should attempt to

deeply involve the victim to arrive at a safety plan that takes into account her interests and wishes while assuring the best interest of the child.

That brings us to what we believe is the bottom line for CPS. Domestic violence situations are intricate, involving complex relationships, history, conflicted and confused emotions and motives. The personal and social circumstances prevailing in domestic violence cases often are so complicated that they cannot be easily sorted out, addressed or changed. Sometimes at the heart of the complexity is the domestic violence victim who is not at a place where she can take action, participate in a safety plan and take an active protective role with her children. When that is apparent, for CPS the best interest of the child must prevail which means that the victim's interests cannot exceed the safety needs of the child. Because of the complexity of domestic violence cases, it is inevitable that in some cases CPS must take action to protect children in opposition to what the victim desires. When this occurs, CPS intervention must be faultless in terms of time and action to immediately mobilize resourceful, supportive, remedial treatment for the domestic violence victim and her family. The safety management strategy in such instances must include immediate and highly active visitation between the victim and her children. While the bottom lines for CPS remains assuring the children are protected, intervention should occur in as sensitive and responsive manner toward the domestic violence victim as possible. Intervention should include offering to help her plan to stay safe, involved, respected, and not judged; this could possibly keep her alive and ultimately may be the best investment in the kids' best interests.