

A Safety Intervention System

Introduction

For over two years, we have addressed safety assessment, safety planning and safety management. Our focus has been directed toward the front end of child protective services. Our intention has been to lay a firm foundation for safety intervention concerned with concepts, definitions, practices and decision-making. We have emphasized casework practice. Now, we are ready to move on to safety intervention required during ongoing child protective services. Certainly the ideas, framework and practice we advanced in previous articles remain relevant and necessary; however, you will see how application and responsibility changes for the ongoing CPS worker.

This month's feature sets the stage for continuing to look at casework practice. As we turn our attention to what happens in safety intervention as the case moves deeper into CPS, we offer a context – a safety intervention system. This is necessary largely because safety intervention nationally has not evolved as a systematic endeavor that takes a family from intake to closure. In many places, safety intervention is pretty much confined to the first week of case contact. In other places, safety intervention becomes fuzzier, less defined as a case moves past investigation. In most places, the definition and clarity of safety intervention occurring during ongoing CPS is mysterious and unsubstantial. To understand the responsibilities of the ongoing CPS caseworker, it may be helpful to place those responsibilities within the context of a safety intervention system.

So, this article is probably more for managers and planners than for caseworkers but, hopefully, it will be useful for them as well.

Properties of a Safety Intervention System

We can think of a safety intervention system as a unified whole comprised of components or parts. The parts, like assessing safety threats, can be related to each other and, when connected, form the whole safety intervention system. Does it make any sense that one thing occurring as a safety intervention at a point within the life of a case occurs without thought or respect for other safety intervention activities that may occur later?

A safety intervention system has purpose. Why else would it exist? The purpose of a safety intervention system is to assure that a child is protected. The purpose is best realized when a child's parents or caregivers are enabled to provide the protection. It could be said that the primary purpose of safety intervention is to enable parents and caregivers to provide protection for their children. Therefore, it follows, that all that happens as a part of the safety intervention system occurs to achieve the primary purpose. All that occurs – the first action to the last – is designed to achieve the primary purpose.

A safety intervention system contains actions, decisions and methods that are organized in such a way so as to result in an orderly process of moving toward the primary purpose. These parts of the system have relation to each other. Actions, decisions and methods are based on the same concepts and definitions, occur in some meaningful progression and are interdependent. A safety intervention system requires that one get on one horse and ride it to the end of the journey. The journey is not stopped short; one doesn't switch horses. The relation of the parts of the safety intervention system is characterized by sequence in activity and movement; flexibility to adjust; certainty with respect to the way of doing things. A safety intervention system influences workers behaving systematically.

A Safety Intervention System as Defined by ASFA and CFSR

Today child welfare is influenced by national and federal influence like no other time. Through their requirements, the Adoption and Safety Families Act (ASFA) and the Federal Children, Family Services Review (CFSR) in effect provide a description of a safety intervention system. A safety intervention system looks like this. (We are looking only at requirements descriptive of safety intervention from these sources.)

- Timely response to contact a family (CFSR);
- Control recurrence (CFSR);
- Expend reasonable efforts to keep children safely in their homes (ASFA);
- Provide services to the family to protect children in the home and prevent removal (CFSR);
- Assess safety in out-of-home placements (ASFA);
- Address safety issues in case (treatment) plans (ASFA);

This one deserves some elaboration. Let's look at exactly what the law says. SEC.475.[42 U.S.C. 675] As used in this part or part B of this title: (1) The term "case plan" means a written document which includes at least the following:

(B) A plan assuring that the child receives safe and proper care and that the services are provided to parents, child and foster parents in order to improve conditions in the parents' home, facilitate return of the child to his own safe home.

- Enhance family capacity to provide for their children's needs [protection] (CFSR);

Remember that this includes providing services to children, parents and foster parents and child and family involvement in case planning.

- Continually assess and manage safety (ASFA); and

The law says... SEC.475.[42 U.S.C. 675] As used in this part or part B of this title: (4) (B) The status of each child is reviewed periodically but no less frequently than once every six months by either a court or by administrative review...in order to determine the safety of the child.

- Evaluate progress toward achieving a safe home (ASFA).

This one also needs some elaboration so we go back to the law. SEC.475.[42 U.S.C. 675] As used in this part or part B of this title: (4) (B) [periodic review to evaluate] ...the extent of compliance with the case plan, and the extent of progress which has been made toward alleviating or mitigating the causes necessitating the placement...

A Safety Intervention System Framework

How is a safety intervention system described, guided and supported?

- Policy

Policy establishes *what* is to be done; what is expected; the rules and boundaries of safety intervention. It articulates the process within which safety intervention will occur. It sets the standards and the limits. Policy identifies the assumptions, beliefs, values and principles that underpin a safety intervention system. It articulates concepts, definitions and protocol. Policy states the purpose of a safety intervention system, outlines how its purpose can be achieved and identifies its outcome. Policy systematically lays out in an orderly fashion the actions, decisions and methods that lead to the achievement of a safety intervention system's outcome.

- Procedures

Procedures provide for *how* safety intervention is to occur. This includes step-by-step descriptions. Procedures include guidelines and instructions. Procedures define the course of action to be taken from intake to closure. Procedures dictate the nature of worker – client – family interaction. Procedures identify required methods, tools, instruments, forms, work organization and record keeping. Procedures operationalize case practice and decision-making within a safety intervention system.

- Staff Development

Training provides the means for knowing how to do safety intervention and mastering the skill necessary to carry it out. Staff development begins

with pre-service efforts to assure that staff possesses essential knowledge and skill prior to being cast into the responsibility for participating in a safety intervention system. Training steps beyond policy and procedures to assure that a safety intervention system operates on the solid ground expressed through research, literature and the state-of-the-art. Staff development continues to provide instruction and reinforcement over time about the actions, methods and decisions that form a safety intervention system. Within a safety intervention system, policy directs what is to be done; procedures direct how to do it; training interprets what a safety intervention system is, what must be known in order to provide safety intervention and what skill must be demonstrated to perform safety intervention effectively.

- Information System

We live in a time in child welfare in which information systems have a profound effect on what we do. Certainly, an automated information system must be considered to be an important part of the framework for a safety intervention system. The information system serves as the overt expression of a safety intervention system. What we mean by that is eventually what is required (policy) and how it is to occur (procedures) (training) become clearly made known within the information system. The results of what a worker does and how he does it is written on the screens of the automated information system. Therefore, the information system serves as a record of a safety intervention system but, perhaps more importantly, prompts and cues staff to be systematic; to follow the system plan. Additionally, the information system can give guidance, help and support by virtue of its capability and construction.

- Supervision

Traditionally, the vote has been in favor of supervisors being the linchpin regarding whether case practice is good or not. We know from our studies of states' approaches to safety intervention that staff typically rely more heavily on their supervisor to articulate a safety intervention system than policy, procedure, training or the information system. Regretfully, this is usually the case because of the deficiencies that staff perceive in other areas within this framework we are describing. Supervision guides, directs, supports and oversees staff implementing a safety intervention system. Supervisors shouldn't make it up and should not rely too much on their experience – at least solely or alone. Supervisors are the purveyors of a safety intervention system. They, therefore, must rely on the quality of how well the system is formed and articulated. Supervisors are best when they are fully informed, coached and expert in all aspects of a safety intervention system. They can only be as effective as the system is good. Supervisors transmit to staff what must be done and how. Supervisors judge when it is not done correctly among individuals and across staff. Supervisors move from overseeing work to creating approaches to correction and development consistent with the design of a safety intervention system.

- Program Management

Program management, within this framework, provides leadership to a safety intervention system. This leadership includes defining how a CPS safety intervention system will interface with a community; how CPS staff will collaborate with allied professionals in order to achieve the purposes of a safety intervention system. Program managers are responsible for generating sufficient staff and program resources to support a safety

intervention system. Program managers employ necessary energy and effort to keep a safety intervention system a) in proper working order; b) responsive to critical feedback; c) routinely updated and improved; and d) effectively communicated within and outside the agency.

- Quality Assurance

To be a dynamic living arrangement, a safety intervention system depends on routine review, evaluation, criticism, feedback and adjustment. Continual improvement can only happen when results of evaluation can be spun into a process for adaptation, improvement or revision. Assuring quality relies on how well a safety intervention system is defined and described in policy and procedures. Those expectations serve as the basis for measurement. Quality assurance is most effective when it doesn't concentrate too much on explanations for success being vested primarily in worker behavior and case results but looks deeper for flaws and gaps in the entire framework described here. Those who perform this function should be well-versed, expert in a safety intervention system.

- Competencies

A safety intervention system becomes alive through the behavior of those responsible for implementation. We have always considered a competency as a worker behavior designed to achieve something. We have determined that there are fifteen safety intervention competencies that are present within a safety intervention system.

1. Gathering safety related information;
2. Assessing present danger;
3. Creating, implementing and managing an immediate-short term protective/safety plan;

4. Assessing impending danger;
5. Assessing protective capacities for the safety plan;
6. Assessing child vulnerability/capacity for self-protection;
7. Creating a continuing safety plan;
8. Using safety concepts to invoke the authority of the court;
9. Evaluating safety in out-of-home placement;
10. Reunifying a child with their family;
11. Assuring that safety plans are working;
12. Arranging/conducting/managing visitation;
13. Analyzing protective capacities to address in the case plan;
14. Creating a case plan that enhances protective capacities; and
15. Assuring the case plan is working - measuring caregiver protective capacity progress and change.

Criteria for Judging the Quality of a Safety Intervention System

Judging the quality of a safety intervention system is a difficult, challenging undertaking. We do not intend to oversimplify that here, but we've decided to include criteria that can serve as a basis for forming a way to judge the attributes and worthiness of a safety intervention system.

Criteria for Judging a Safety Intervention System

<i>Conceptually Based</i>	Is the system built on a conceptual understanding of how safety and danger are manifested?
<i>Correspondence with the State-of-the-Art</i>	Does the system include up-to-date research, literature and experience available nationally?
<i>Clarity and Precision in Form and Function</i>	Is the system and all of its parts clear and understandable including relation and contribution to purpose?
<i>Characteristics of Practice and Decision-Making</i>	How are activities, methods and decisions actually performed within the system?
<i>Compliance with Established Expectations</i>	Do activities, methods and decisions occur according to requirements set forth in the system?
<i>Congruence among Staff Perceptions</i>	Do staff view and understand the system in common ways?
<i>Consistency in Use</i>	Are activities, methods and decisions performed in similar ways across all staff?
<i>Cohesiveness among Concepts, Structure and Application</i>	Is the system a unified whole?
<i>Competency Based</i>	Does the system perpetuate desired worker behavior throughout?
<i>Constitutionality</i>	Is the system respectful and does it safeguard individual, civil rights?

What a Safety Intervention System Does

When a child is judged to be in present or impending danger, a safety intervention system implements certain actions, methods and decisions to change that child's status to one of refuge, security and protection. The means for achieving that status is to enable a parent or caregiver to provide protection for the child. To reach that end, a safety intervention system accomplishes the following:

- Identifies threats of severe harm;

- Judges parent protective capacity;
- Controls threats of severe harm;
- Assesses diminished parent protective capacities;
- Develops case plans to reduce threats and enhance parent protective capacities;
- Arranges for services to reduce threats and enhance parent protective capacities;
- Evaluates extent of progress; and
- Closes cases with safe homes; or
- Seeks out alternative, permanent safe homes.

What a Safety Intervention System Achieves

Notably, the conclusion of our list of safety intervention accomplishments is the establishment of a safe home. We close with a summary of what a safe home is. Remember, earlier when looking at ASFA direction for creating a safety intervention system, we quoted a portion of the law? The law requires...

*A plan assuring that the child receives safe and proper care and that the services are provided to parents, child and foster parents in order to improve conditions in the parents' home, facilitate return of the child to his own **safe home.***

The outcome of a safety intervention system is a safe home. Cases can be closed at the point that a child is residing in a permanent safe home. A safety intervention system is successful when it achieves a permanent safe home. A safe home contains the following qualities:

- Absence or reduction of threats of severe harm;
- Presence of sufficient parent or caregiver protective capacities;
- Existing and experienced refuge for children;
- Perceived and felt security by children; and
- Confidence in consistency of conditions that produced the safe home.