



Part 3

Introduction

This article completes the series on Family Functioning Assessment (FFA) which includes Safety Assessment. These two assessments represent the continuing purposeful evaluation of family situations to determine who CPS will serve. This determination is based upon child safety and protection. In this final article, we look carefully at Family Functioning Assessment Decision Making Standards. In this, we include consideration of how Safety Assessment and Safety Plan Analysis contribute to safety planning and safety management. The standards provided here also cover case management responsibilities associated with completion of the FFA.

Family Functioning Assessment Decision Making Standards



The FFA worker analyzes FFA information in order to complete the Family Functioning Assessment and reach FFA decisions.

The FFA worker documents each assessment area (question) demonstrating what information has been collected and is known. The FFA worker then analyzes the information, identifies conclusions related to the FFA decisions, may provide a summary of his/her general conclusions about the family, and provides conclusions from the safety assessment. All FFA decisions can be justified by the documented information.

The FFA worker assesses child safety and reaches a conclusion about child safety at the conclusion of the FFA.

Child safety is the governing concept. That means that child safety is the focus of the FFA and that the mission of safety intervention is to enhance caregiver protective capacities in order to assure child safety in families. The FFA worker understands that the single most important judgment that he/she makes is whether a child is in impending danger or is safe. Using all that he/she knows about a family, the FFA worker rigorously employs the safety assessment instrument to rule in and rule out impending danger. The FFA

worker qualifies family conditions as impending danger threats by applying the safety threshold criteria. The FFA worker qualifies whether vulnerable children are subject to impending danger. The FFA worker evaluates caregiver protective capacities and considers those which are diminished. The FFA worker rules in or rules out whether a caregiver can and will be protective. The FFA worker reaches a final conclusion as to whether a child is safe or not which becomes the basis for who CPS will serve.

The FFA worker knows that the fundamental responsibility at the conclusion of the FFA is to make a judgment and determination about the existence of impending danger. The FFA worker understands that impending danger exists when a child lives in a state of danger in which family behaviors, attitudes, motives, emotions, and/or situations pose a specific, observable threat which may not always be active but can become active at any time and can be anticipated to have severe effects on a child. Because impending danger commonly is not necessarily obvious at the onset of CPS intervention, the FFA worker understands that it can be identified and understood upon more fully evaluating individual and family conditions and functioning which is why the official safety assessment occurs at the conclusion of the FFA.

The FFA worker verifies allegations of maltreatment and reaches a finding of maltreatment at the conclusion of FFA.

The FFA worker considers two assessment questions (i.e., information standards) to reach a determination about whether maltreatment has occurred or currently exists. The two questions are:

- ✘ What is the extent of maltreatment?
- ✘ What are the circumstances that surround the maltreatment?

The decision to verify the presence of maltreatment is justified by specific, detailed information from these two assessment areas. The decision is based on information that complies with the preponderant evidentiary standard. The FFA worker knows that this determination must be based on fact.

In cases where children are not safe, the FFA worker completes a Safety Plan Analysis in order to inform safety planning.

The FFA worker knows that safety management options occur in a continuum from in-home safety plans to combinations of in-home and out-of-home options to out-of-home safety plans. The FFA worker understands that his/her responsibility is to think and plan flexibly in order to select the correct and most effective safety plan option. The FFA worker understands also the importance of involving the caregivers in that process.

An overarching safety intervention value is that intervention should be the least intrusive necessary. This means the least interference in family life with respect to decisions, actions taken, and services provided that is necessary in order to assure a child is safe. The FFA worker approaches managing safety by applying this value and principle of practice and decision making. To the FFA worker, this means analyzing the information he/she has collected, involving and communicating with caregivers, enlisting family members in conversations about options, and thinking creatively about what can be done to keep a child safe. The FFA worker uses the Safety Plan Analysis to rule out safety management strategies from a least to most intrusiveness perspective.

The FFA worker oversees the safety plan through weekly personal contacts with participants in the safety plan including at least one-face to-face contact with children until the case is transferred to ongoing CPS.

The FFA worker knows that a present danger plan is put in place to keep a child safe while the FFA information collection process continues. That understanding includes the anticipation that the question of a child's safety will be more thoroughly evaluated at the conclusion of the FFA. The safety assessment occurring at the conclusion of the FFA results in the determination as to whether a safety plan is indicated and if the family will be transferred to ongoing CPS for continuing services. The FFA worker remains responsible for management and oversight of the safety plan until an ongoing CPS worker receives the case and can assume responsibility.

As long as the FFA worker is responsible for managing the safety plan, he or she will conduct weekly oversight which can be done through personal contacts with those who are participating in and responsible for the safety plan activities and actions. Personal contact can occur in person, by telephone, and by email. The FFA worker understands that it is preferable to actually have a personal contact with the child weekly too with face-to-face being the most desirable. The purpose of the weekly contacts is to assure that the safety plan is being implemented according to plan; that those participating in the plan remain accessible, available, and committed; that accessibility between caregivers and children are occurring as planned; and that the safety plan is working – the child is safe.

The FFA worker establishes conditions for return for safety plans that involve child placement with kin or foster care.

Often safety management requires an out-of-home safety plan. The placement may be with relatives or foster parents. The FFA worker understands that caregivers want to fully understand the reasons for placement and to be well informed about what the conditions are for their child being returned to them. At the time that a placement as all or part of the safety plan occurs, the FFA worker explains in detail his/her conclusions about impending danger, conclusions about caregiver protective capacities, the process he/she went through to arrive at the conclusion that separating the child from the home is necessary, and what must exist within the child's home for the child to be returned. While the FFA worker knows that in many instances caregivers will not understand or agree with the need for an out-of-home safety plan, he/she is committed to full disclosure about these critical decisions that affect family life and caregiver authority.

The FFA worker provides to the caregivers a written statement of the conditions for return. These conditions are specific statements about exactly what circumstances and behavior must be apparent and routine in the home before the child can be returned. The FFA worker makes the written statement of conditions for return available to caregivers in both voluntary placement situations involving kin and involuntary placements in kin and foster care that are accompanied by court order. The FFA worker understands that when it is possible that is it good practice to have the conditions for return entered as part of the court order.

The FFA worker consults with an FFA supervisor throughout the FFA to inform the supervisor of the status of the FFA process and for guidance related to effective intervention.

Dynamic supervision is fundamental to safety intervention and effective practice and decision making. The FFA worker liberally seeks out supervision in order to keep the supervisor informed of the progress of the FFA and to gain guidance and input which will positively influence FFA case practice and decision making. While weekly supervisory conferences are expected, it makes sense that serendipitous consultations occur also so that the FFA worker seeks out spontaneous kinds of input and guidance with respect to specific issues, challenges, and barriers that are being encountered.

The FFA worker is diligent and timely in completing the FFA.

Traditionally agencies have had time lines for completing initial interventions. This standard is not regulated by an administrative requirement but by values and good practice. The FFA worker values the rights of caregivers and respects their interest and feelings. Diligence and timeliness related to completing an FFA is influenced by what is important to the caregivers in a case. The FFA worker is concerned about how long the FFA feels to and is experienced by the caregivers and family members. Operating from the perspective of the family, the FFA worker understands the importance of expediency and being informed in a timely way. Since a child's safety is involved and since moving toward resolution of family conditions and caregiver behavior concerned with protectiveness is paramount, the FFA worker manages his/her assignments and workload in ways that attempt to reach timely completion of each FFA.

The FFA worker understands that an FFA is not complete until it has been documented and decisions have been approved.

The FFA worker finalizes the FFA by assuring that documentation is complete including information standard, the Family Functioning Assessment, Safety Intervention Analysis, and the Safety Plan.

The FFA worker understands that the FFA is not officially concluded until the record has been documented. Documentation of the FFA can occur as the FFA process unfolds. The information standard can be documented as information is being collected. The safety assessment can be completed at such time as the FFA worker believes he/she possesses enough information to complete the assessment and justify the assessment through the information that has been collected. When a Safety Assessment results in the identification of impending danger, then the Safety Plan Analysis and Safety Plan must be done immediately so that a Safety Plan can be installed promptly. Other documentation can then be finalized such as identifying the maltreatment finding and addressing other agency documentation requirements.

An FFA supervisor reviews and approves the completed FFA.

The final action and decision occurring in an FFA is supervisory review and approval. The FFA supervisor knows that his/her approval means that he/she agrees with how the FFA was conducted; believes that caregivers were effectively involved in so as they were willing and able; concludes information collection efforts were rigorous and that sufficient information was collected; agrees with the FFA worker's decisions, how the decisions were reached, and understands how decisions are justified by information the FFA

worker documented. The supervisory approval also establishes that the documentation is acceptable.

The FFA worker prepares the case for transfer to ongoing and participates with the ongoing worker in the case transfer process.

The FFA worker understands that the FFA is the second function within the overall safety intervention system and that the FFA function contributes to advancing the right cases forward for remedial assistance. The FFA worker sees him/herself as part of the overall safety intervention system and knows that what he or she does contributes to the whole of intervention and to the mission of CPS. The FFA worker knows that the work that he/she has done does not complete safety intervention and that what continues remains a work in progress (unless the case is closed at the conclusion of the FFA). Because of those understandings, the FFA worker prepares the case for transfer in complete and thorough ways in order to produce as seamless a transfer as possible. This includes: (a) assuring that the record is complete as set forth in previous standards and (b) readying the caregivers and family members for the transfer.

Safety intervention is most effective when case movement is timely and smoothly achieved as FFA workers and ongoing CPS workers operate in tandem to transfer information and responsibility. This means these workers are committed to communication and methods for transferring responsibilities that are influenced by how the family is experiencing the process and based on what the family knows and understands. The time line for case transfer begins when the FFA worker completes the FFA documentation and the supervisor approves the FFA and ends when the PCFA worker assumes full responsibility for the case. As part of the case transfer,

the FFA worker and PCFA worker staff the case and complete family introductions. A week for that process to occur can feel like a long time to a family, particularly when consideration includes timely case movement, readiness and motivation, and focusing on where caregivers and family members are (i.e., feelings, attitudes, understanding) with respect to intervention overall.

Closing

In this series of articles concerned with Family Functioning Assessment, we have attempted to demonstrate the significance of this aspect of the safety intervention system as crucial to identifying the correct families for CPS to serve and to show that this is a professional area of work demanding highly skilled staff. We have emphasized that the effectiveness of this area of work depends on a value base, clarity in purpose, interpersonal effectiveness that contributes to effective information collection, critical thinking and decision-making facility, and effective supervision. Finally we hope that we have provided a convincing review of this early intervention – Family Functioning Assessment – as a social service intervention and an essential component of a safety intervention system.