

Q and A about Safety Intervention

March 2011

Introduction

This month we consider one question.

Question

How is a present danger protective plan different than a safety plan?

Answer

Almost always present danger is a family circumstance that you discover at the initial contact in a case. Present danger is an immediate, significant, and clearly observable family condition occurring in the present tense, already endangering or threatening to endanger a child. Present danger is also referred to as immediate harm, immediate severe harm, or imminent harm. It is important to understand that the primary criterion that qualifies present danger is what is happening that endangers a child is happening now; it is currently in process of actively placing a child in peril. Here are some examples of present danger:

- A four-year-old girl is in her home unsupervised for the afternoon.
- A parent of an infant is passed out.
- A parent is telling relatives that her toddler is possessed by the devil and she is threatening to do something drastic to save the child.
- A mother leaves her 2-year-old child unattended in a car at a strip shopping center.
- A couple left their young children at home last night while they went out and are reported to do this frequently each week.

- A 5-year-old has a serious non accidental physical injury which no one can explain.
- An 8-year-old has a serious, acute diabetes condition which if not properly treated could result in serious harm or death and the mother is not providing the child with his medication.
- A mother is arrested for DUI and her children are with her.
- A 9-year-old developmentally disabled girl lives with her aunt and uncle in a home where methamphetamine is being produced.

These examples demonstrate the immediacy of the situation, the fact that what is happening is happening now or is occurring within a current process.¹ Because of the immediacy of the situation something must be done immediately to protect the child. A present danger plan must be put in place.

So what is a present danger plan? A present danger plan is an intervention designed to control and manage the present danger situation so that the child is protected while a Family Functioning Assessment (FFA) continues. (The FFA is also known as initial assessment or investigation in some places.) The present danger plan is short-term. It lasts until the FFA is complete. Why is that? The present danger examples you read above represent only what is happening at a given time. During the first contact with a family, you can conclude that a child is in present danger but almost never can conclude that what you are seeing is either typical of the family or is an anomaly. It is critical to continue the FFA to fully understand the family in order to know if the present danger you first encountered was a one-time only thing or more typical of how the family usually functions. In other words – was the present danger akin to an accident - a totally unusual circumstance - or was it an occurrence that is typical, common, or

¹ Within a current process means that although at this minute a child might not be in danger there is a pattern that exists in which what places the child in present danger occurs with such regularity that it could begin again the same day of the report, that night, or the next day. Notice the example of children being left alone. These children might be supervised at the time of the report and even at the initial contact. What has to be reconciled concerning present danger is whether being unsupervised is routinely in process – occurring regularly.

frequent in a family? Until those questions can be answered, present danger plans assure that children are safe. This allows for fuller understanding of families and avoids making premature conclusions about who is in need of Child Protective Services (CPS) and who is not.

When establishing present danger plans, you seldom have the luxury of creative planning. Your options are limited in part because of the need to act expediently. We find that there are only a few options that are available to you during the time that you identify present danger and take the action necessary to establish the same day present danger plan.

- In-home present danger plans
 - A responsible adult moves into the home 24/7.
 - A responsible adult is in the home periodically.
 - A responsible adult routinely monitors the home.
 - The threatening person leaves the home and it is determined will remain away from the home under prescribed conditions.

- Out-of-home present danger plans
 - The child lives temporarily with someone in the family network as a negotiated and voluntary agreement.
 - Children are legally placed with relative.
 - Children are legally placed in foster care.

From our point of view, any of these options are to be in place for no longer than 30 days.²

The FFA provides for the agency's safety assessment of impending danger, the safety conclusion, and the decision to serve a family based on children being unsafe. It is at that time in the case process that a safety plan is installed. So, now

² 30 days is the standard for completion of the FFA.

we turn to understanding how a safety plan is different from a present danger plan.

The safety plan is a written arrangement between caregivers and the agency that establishes how impending danger threats³ to child safety will be managed. Unlike the present danger plan, the safety plan is not a temporary plan. The safety plan must be implemented and active as long as impending danger threats to child safety exist and caregiver protective capacities are insufficient to assure a child is protected.

Remember the limited options for present danger plans? Well another difference is that safety plans are more robust. While applying the least intrusive alternatives available that will assure protection, safety plans can be comprehensive, involving different methods, lots of people, different intensity and level of effort. Safety plans can be devised with various interventions:

- In-home safety plans using the family network – 24/7 or variations
- In-home safety plans using temporary separation of the child from the home
- In-home safety plans using safety services
- In-home safety plans using supervision and oversight
- Combinations of in-home and out-of-home safety plans using the family network or foster care
- Out-of-home safety plans flexibly using the family network with more than one home involved
- Out-of-home safety plans placing with relatives
- Out-of-home safety plans placing with foster parents

³ Impending danger is associated with a child living or being in a state of danger, a position of continual danger. Danger may not exist at a particular moment or be an immediate concern but a state of danger exists.

The FFA results in a fuller understanding of the family in general and of impending danger specifically. Unlike present danger plans, safety plans must consider and manage the nature of the impending danger; the frequency of occurrence; family conditions, stress, or situations that stimulate, influence, or cause the impending danger. Therefore safety plans have a time framework that includes the identification of schedules, assignments, frequencies (when something is to happen), and duration (how something is supposed to happen).

The purpose of present danger plans is to suspend whatever is happening in the family long enough to assess for impending danger. Present danger plans are pretty much exclusively about surveillance. So present danger plans are not expected to include some sort of service provision. Safety plans can include safety services as part of that which manages the impending danger. For instance, consider these safety services examples that may teach, support, and assist in relationship to managing the impending danger:

- Out-patient or in-patient medical and mental health services
- Substance abuse intervention and detoxification
- In-home health care
- Stress reduction
- Crisis intervention & counseling
- Friendly visiting
- Basic parenting assistance and teaching
- Homemaker services
- Home management
- Social support
- In-home babysitting
- Resource acquisition
- Transportation services
- Employment assistance
- Housing assistance

It is important to remember that safety services are not intended to change caregiver behavior like a case plan. Safety services are expected to have direct influence on controlling impending danger threats.

You remember that the purpose of the present danger plan is to assure a child is protected while the FFA is conducted. The purpose of the safety plan is to assure that a child is protected while case planned service and change efforts occur with caregivers and the family.