



Initial Assessment Program Statement

The Office of Children's Services provides initial assessments to determine child safety on all reports screened in during the intake process. The initial assessment process begins immediately after a protective services report is assigned to an initial assessment worker. The worker has multiple goals to accomplish during this process while following standardized policy and procedures throughout the initial assessment. The focus of this assessment is to gather sufficient information about the family which allows workers to make educated safety determinations about present and impending danger as well as the level of risk of future harm. This assessment informs the level of intervention, if any, the circumstances may require.

By the conclusion of the initial assessment process, the worker must also determine whether the child suffered harm as a result of maltreatment with a finding of "substantiated" or "not substantiated" based on the initial allegations or other child abuse or neglect. This finding is required, however, it does not dictate if or how a family will be served by OCS. For example, the allegations of maltreatment may be "not substantiated" because a child was not harmed, but the family circumstances may be placing a child at high risk of harm. A family in such a situation may still be provided services to ameliorate the dangerous conditions and prevent future episodes of child maltreatment. The most important function of the initial assessment process is determining child safety and controlling any threats to the child's safety occurring in the present or likely to occur in the near future.

Safety Assessment

Safety assessment is the continuous process of information collection related to child safety in six domains to identify safety threats and protective capacities. The purpose of the safety assessment is to determine if there is present and/or impending danger. Assessment of safety is an ongoing process that begins at intake and continues until the point of case closure. The assessment of safety is precise in focus: information is gathered and analyzed according to six family centered domains that help develop understanding of family dynamics and functioning.

The following six questions are based on the six domains and informs what must be known about a family in order to guide safety analysis and decision making. Standardized information gathering is crucial; while present danger is readily identifiable and likely observable at the time of initial contact, impending danger is more elusive and requires focused professional information gathering and assessment. The six areas of focus are:

1. What is the extent of the maltreatment?
2. What are the circumstances that surround the maltreatment?
3. How do the children in the family function?
4. How do the adults in the family function?
5. What are the general parenting practices of the caregivers in the family?
6. What are the disciplinary practices of the caregivers?

Initial assessment workers gather information using an approach that seeks to engage and interact with all family members with the aim of learning about the family and its members, and

simultaneously gathering information to identify the presence or absence of safety threats within the family.

It is the information gathering and assessment of the interplay among these six areas that further informs workers about unseen, yet very real threats. A complete safety assessment cannot be done without this structured approach to information gathering. The importance of sufficient information collection cannot be over emphasized and its purpose diminished. If sufficient information is not known about how a family functions and how the maltreatment manifests, future decision making about whether the family requires intervention and what/if any services they need could be made on faulty assumptions.

During the assessment process, workers evaluate the parental protective capacities. These capacities are personal and parenting behavioral, cognitive and emotional characteristics that are directly associated with being protective of one's children. In many of the families OCS encounters, there is at least one parent who has sufficient protective capacities to control any identified or potential threats to safety. In those cases, there is no need for intervention. However, in a small number of other cases, neither parent has sufficient protective capacities to control safety threats on their own or without some kind of assistance. Those are the families where the child is unsafe or at high risk for maltreatment and must be served by OCS either in an in-home or out-of-home setting depending on the family's resources available to engage in suitable safety planning.



Safety Analysis

Safety analysis is the examination of information collected during the safety assessment process and evaluation of parent/caregiver protective capacities. The purpose of the safety analysis is to determine if a child is unsafe and to determine the necessary level of intrusion and level of effort required to assure child safety. The safety decision can be either safe or unsafe.

The safety analysis process begins after the safety assessment information gathering process concludes. Workers and supervisors critically analyze the meaning and significance of the information collected and how it influences the safety threshold. Within the world of child protective services there is a clear distinction between risk of maltreatment and child safety.

Risk of maltreatment can be described as the likelihood (chance, potential, and prospect) for parenting behavior that is harmful and destructive to a child's cognitive, social, emotional and/or physical development and those with the parenting responsibility are unwilling or unable to behave differently. Risk occurs along a continuum from low to high and the time frame as to when maltreatment may occur is unknown.

Child safety is concerned with the present or very immediate future and focuses on present or impending danger. Present danger implies there is immediate, significant and clearly observable severe harm or threat of severe harm occurring to a child in the present requiring an immediate protective action. Impending danger means there are threatening conditions that are not immediately obvious or currently active but are out of control and likely to cause serious harm to a child in the near future.

A worker's first responsibility at initial contact is the assessment of present danger. An immediate protective action will be taken to secure the child's safety when present danger is identified, whether that is through an in-home safety plan, out-of-home safety plan, or a combination of the two. In the absence of present danger, the worker continues their assessment process and gathers information in a focused manner. The worker also continues the assessment process after intervention of present danger has occurred.

Assessing for impending danger requires a great deal of skill and focus. Using the information learned from child, parent and collateral interviews, the worker determines if any threats to child safety exist, what the diminished or enhanced protective capacities are of the parent to manage those threats, and if any family services intervention is required to assure child safety. Accurate

assessment of impending danger serves to help reduce repeat maltreatment and if identified early enough, may help reduce the need for out-of-home placement.

Initial assessments are completed within 30-days and subsequently closed through the supervisory review process within 45-days. At the conclusion of the assessment, regardless of whether the case is opened for intervention or closed, a final determination must be made regarding the allegations of maltreatment (substantiated or not substantiated) along with appropriate identification of the maltreater. If the case is opened for services, the continuity of service delivery and support from OCS is assured regardless of the level of intervention employed.

The information gathered during the initial assessment process and the subsequent analysis is not only used to inform initial safety decisions but also serves as the foundation for building the ongoing assessment and case plan. If the determination at the conclusion of the assessment process is that a child is unsafe or at high risk of maltreatment and there is not a caregiver with sufficient protective capacities to protect, services are provided through the Family Services Program.

