

The Differences between Risk and Safety

No matter what your job function is in child protective services (CPS) there is nothing more fundamentally important than understanding the differences between conditions in a family that create risk of maltreatment and conditions that create threats to child safety.

This is not an issue of semantics. Nor is it just an abstract conceptual debate to be enjoyed by non-practitioners. Having a real and practical understanding of the differences will have a profound effect on the decisions you make daily while conversing with caregivers in CPS families.

Do you and your colleagues have an understanding of the differences between risk and safety that go beyond abstract jargon? Are you sure?

As a reality check, listen at case staffings, unit meetings or anywhere a case is being discussed. Do you hear phrases such as, “at risk,” “imminent harm,” “high risk,” “risk of placement,” “unsafe,” “at risk of serious harm,” “safety risks,” etc. used interchangeably? Are the issues of whether maltreatment is substantiated (or indicated), whether there is risk of maltreatment and whether the children are safe distinguished as separate matters? Many people in CPS and child welfare seem to think, speak and behave as if these terms mean and imply the same thing. This confused thinking really complicates good decision making, particularly regarding the ultimate responsibility of CPS---judging and controlling threats to child safety.

We have found that the place to begin when gaining clarity about these concepts is to be certain of what defines each. Sometimes this is a problem in states where the definitions for child abuse and neglect come directly from the statutes and deal primarily with the effects of child maltreatment, like bruises. You may want to check out what definition your agency uses to define child maltreatment and whether it is strictly a legal (statutory) one or one that is more descriptive of what child maltreatment is. For the purpose of this study, we'll use

a more dynamic, descriptive definition of what child maltreatment is. *Child Maltreatment* refers to:

Parenting behavior that is harmful and destructive to a child's cognitive, social, emotional, physical development and those with parenting responsibility are unwilling or unable to behave differently.

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (for national reporting of child abuse and neglect) refers to child maltreatment as "behavior outside the norm by a caregiver that ... causes physical or emotional harm."

In 1985, we defined child maltreatment like this:

When a child is physically, emotionally or sexually treated by caretakers in such a manner that the child's emotional, cognitive and/or physical development is or will be impaired and the caretakers are unwilling or unable to behave differently.

We can note that these definitions go beyond a focus on effects such as injuries by emphasizing dysfunctional parent – child interactions that, over some period of time, result in detrimental effects for the child. We can also notice that these definitions give some importance to caregiver departure from normal, acceptable parenting behavior.

So, what is *risk of maltreatment*?

Risk of maltreatment really means the likelihood that maltreatment will occur or reoccur in the future. You might think of risk as synonymous with words like chance, prospect or potential. Based on the first definition of child maltreatment above, risk of maltreatment might be defined as:

The likelihood (chance, potential, prospect) for parenting behavior that is harmful and destructive to a child's cognitive, social, emotional, physical development and those with parenting responsibility are unwilling or unable to behave differently.

It is easy to see that, while the definition for maltreatment and risk of maltreatment are similar, they are clearly different. Child maltreatment refers to something that has happened or is happening and risk of child maltreatment refers to something that probably will happen.

There are a couple of things that you should be clear about regarding these two definitions. One, neither definition relies on severity as a criterion. In other words, child maltreatment and risk of child maltreatment both refer to harm at any level of severity. Two, both of these definitions are qualified generally by time. Child maltreatment represents something that has occurred or is occurring. Risk of child maltreatment represents something that is likely to occur some time in the future.

We should mention risk factors. What are they? Risk factors are family behaviors and conditions that suggest to us that caregivers are likely to maltreat their child in the future. You've likely heard of low, moderate and high risk factors. This gradation tells us a couple of things.

1 - Risk factors of various degrees and seriousness may exist within a family.

2 - Some risk factors (i.e., high risk factors) are better for indicating the likelihood of child maltreatment.

We've used the definition of "child maltreatment" in order to understand what "risk of child maltreatment" is. Now we turn to "child safety".

Child Safety refers to

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.

Therefore, a child is Unsafe when:

There is a threat of danger to a child within a family/home and the protective capacities within the home are insufficient to manage the threat of danger thus requiring outside intervention.

To really understand this definition you need to understand what a “threat of danger” is. Some people call a threat of danger by other terms: threat of serious harm; safety factor, safety influence, safety threat and so on. Whatever label one chooses to put on threat of danger, what it means is:

A specific family situation or behavior, emotion, motive, perception or capacity of a family member that is out-of-control, imminent and likely to have severe effects on a vulnerable child.

Let’s look at what differentiates a threat of danger within a family from other family conditions.

- Threats of danger are very specific. They are observable. You can know a threat of danger exists and is happening. In and of itself, the threat of danger stimulates one to reason out the implications for serious results and need to take prompt action. Because of the specificity of threats of danger, we can actually identify a limited list of family conditions that apply.
- A threat of danger is out-of-control. Without some kind of interference, the behavior, motive, attitude, emotion, etc. will not be managed or controlled.

- A threat of danger is imminent with respect to the certainty one can have that it will continue to exist; it will have harmful results and the effects of the threat of danger may occur anytime within the near future.
- A threat of danger is likely to have severe effects. While we cannot know with any certainty about the results of a threat of danger, it is reasonable to assume the worse since the focus of the danger is a vulnerable child. A vulnerable child is obviously more likely to suffer serious results from a threat of danger. The severity we are referring to here includes serious injury, disfigurement, terror, disability and death.

As we return to the question of the differences between risk and safety, perhaps you can see that the definition and description of safety and threats of danger is remarkably different from risk. It is obvious in several ways. So, let's conclude this study by focusing on the differences between risk and safety.

Summary of the Differences between Risk and Safety

<u>RISK</u> is concerned with...	<u>SAFETY</u> is concerned with...
The likelihood of future maltreatment	Current dangerous family conditions
Maltreatment on a continuum from mild to severe	Severe forms of dangerous family conditions and severe maltreatment only
Family functioning	Those family conditions that meet the danger threshold
General child well-being	Specific threats to a child's safety only
Decision making based on an unlimited time frame (any time in the future)	Decision making based on the present to the immediate near future (next few days)
A judgment about any negative effects from future maltreatment	A judgment about the certainty of severe effects
All family situations and behaviors from onset progressing into seriously troubled	Family situations and behaviors that are currently out-of-control only
Evaluating family situations and behaviors that may need to be treated	Evaluating family situations and behaviors that must be managed and controlled
All aspects of family life relevant to understanding the likelihood of maltreatment	A limited number of safety factors only

Here is a brain teaser for you. See if you can explain it.

"All safety factors are risk factors but not all risk factors are safety factors."



the differences between risk and safety

For additional information on the difference between risk and safety, check out our 4 ½ minute video. You will need Windows Media Player v7 or higher to view it.

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"All safety factors are risk factors but not all risk factors are safety factors."