

Dangerous People

Mick

Grandparents report their two year old granddaughter Lisa is being abused. They believe their daughter Melissa's boyfriend Mick is responsible for the abuse and they describe Mick as "very scary" and intimidating. When I meet with Melissa and Mick to conduct my initial assessment, the mother and her boyfriend deny that child abuse is occurring. "We don't have any problems in our home that a little more money wouldn't fix," they say. They indicate that the grandparents are harassing them. I meet with the couple together and interview both of them privately. Mick avoids eye contact, is physically jittery and friendly but not very talkative. He expresses understanding about the report and my need to check out what is going on in the family. I am wondering if he is sincere or patronizing me. Mick is controlled showing no emotion or reaction to my inquiries. He discounts the grandparents' view of him or their wishes that he was not involved with their daughter and granddaughter. He shrugs off their concerns showing no apparent resentment toward them. He says that he gets along well with the child. He says he is open to CPS intervention and simply wants to be helpful if he can. During my visit in the home I notice that the Melissa seems to cue off what Mick says and does; she seems tense. Lisa avoids Mick; is alert to his movement and voice; and tends to cling to Melissa. Mick seems to have an imposing effect in the family. Lisa has a small knot on her head containing a one inch scratch. Melissa says the injury occurred when she fell into the coffee table. As my first visit draws to a close, I am feeling that something seems fishy about this guy. He is being cooperative but comes across a bit phony and evasive even a little "slick." I doubt Melissa's capacity to protect Lisa from Mick if he is abusing her. I know I've got some serious information collecting to do and need to meet right away with the grandparents to figure out why they see Mick as "very scary" and intimidating. I need to figure out what makes this guy tick. I wonder if he might be dangerous.

Dangerous People

Experience tells us that thankfully there are few people reported to CPS that can be considered “dangerous” with respect to how we are talking about that sort of person here. While that can feel like a relief, it also means you’ll have less experience with such people and may have more difficulty identifying them. Actually, professionals who have studied *dangerous people* say they can be hard to identify.

Dangerous people are those who are likely to cause injury and pain with intent. The dangerous person doesn’t abuse a child by mistake but on purpose. Such individuals have a kind of predatory nature. They are extremely self-centered which supports their behavior and results in a disregard for others or their suffering. Dangerous people are usually men with histories of violence. Their lives lack stability related to such things as relationships and employment. Dangerous people are seriously maladjusted (which may not be obvious.) Dangerous people may experience a range of personality disorders or psychopathology.

An Impending Danger to a Child’s Safety

You are not likely to catch dangerous people in the process of acting out when you show up at a home. The dangerous person typically can be thought of as an impending danger to a child’s safety. You may want to look back at our March article to check out what you understand about present and impending danger. When you suspect or have reason to believe a person may be dangerous, the challenge for you during initial assessment is to gather enough information to verify and explain whom you’ve encountered. Do you know what information you need to collect and analyze?

Practice Principles

When you are faced with determining if a caregiver is dangerous there are some practice principles to keep in mind during safety assessment: Let's consider these principles using Mick as our example.

- I don't need to know the cause for what makes Mick dangerous; it's only important to know if Mick is dangerous and immediately to do something to control it.
- I can't tell if Mick is dangerous by looking at him; dangerous people don't look a certain way; I have to gather sufficient information that will inform and support my conclusion.
- I will seek to determine if Mick is dangerous based on characteristics he possesses that are typical of dangerous people.
- Identification will likely depend on a wide/deep reaching assessment; I will need lots of exposure to Mick and people who know him.
- I keep in mind that I am looking for a particular kind of abuser; I am assessing whether Mick is someone who intends to hurt others and shows no remorse for it; I am aware that if Mick is a dangerous person he will be among the few I am likely to see when I conduct initial assessments. The fact that dangerous people are an unusual lot; that Mick might be dangerous; and that Mick could cause serious harm to both Melissa and Lisa heightens my responsibility to be thorough in my initial assessment.
- Since I've decided that my assessment will focus on whether Mick is dangerous, I will take immediate steps to assure that Lisa is safe while my

initial assessment proceeds. At the same time, I will consult with Melissa about Lisa's safety and her own.

Assessing the Dangerous Person

Experience and research from CPS, the mental health field, the domestic violence field and the criminal justice field give us direction for what to look for and evaluate. As you consider these areas of inquiry remember – do not “over assess.” Over assessing means moving too quickly to judgment; making more than you should out of limited or vivid information; drawing conclusions prior to a thorough examination of supportive data.

The characteristics we will look at here are generally associated with dangerous people. They are not definitive, predictive or absolute. In other words, consider these qualities and attributes individually, in total and in the context of the consistency of the person's life, behavior and emotion as you currently understand it.

Demographics

Dangerous people are more likely to be men in their late teens to early twenties. Look for economic problems. Here we refer to inadequate finances, being unemployed or under employed and a poor employment history. Does that cause you to wonder whether some of these guys take advantage of a woman's affections in order to solve their economic woes? The presence of considerable stress is common among these men. Because their attachments to people are limited, superficial, short term or non-existent, they have little support. What support they may have is likely negative especially since they tend to associate with people who are either like them or dependent and vulnerable. Dangerous people often live in environments where violence is an accepted way of life.

The person you are evaluating is certainly a major source of information about demographics but also consider seeking information from household members, extended family, friends and associates, current and former employees and professionals.

History

A person's past may be the most useful source for judging the tendency toward dangerousness. Dangerous people typically have a life long history of violence. There is likely an indication of violence at an early age. They may have come from violent families. An examination of history may reveal violence involving pets and animals, fighting and trouble in school and progressive violence in the community including difficulties with the criminal justice system. Dangerous people's histories include early maladjustment. Since it is likely that their histories include intervention of some sort, you may find prior supervision problems, non-compliance with remediation attempts and unresponsiveness to treatment or criminal justice intervention.

Relatives are an obvious source for historical information. But...keep in mind that the history of the dangerous person may be well documented in agencies and professional records. It may be possible to seek out individual professionals who have encountered and worked with the person.

Functioning

Dangerous people can suffer from borderline or antisocial personality disorders. Their relationships are conflicted and unstable. They act out their emotions. They are self-centered, yet are uncertain or insecure about themselves. They divide themselves and others into either all good or all bad. They have no capacity to take an external perspective about themselves. They are jealous.

Dangerous people possess features of psychopathology. They have no regard for others or their social experience. They lack love and express low empathy. Regardless of their acts, they lack guilt or shame. They are easily aroused or agitated.

You may notice active symptoms of major mental illness when seeking to determine if a person is dangerous. Those include conceptual disorganization; threatening mannerisms and posturing; grandiosity; hostility; suspiciousness and excitement.

Other personal qualities associated with dangerous people include:

- A lack of insight
- Low average to limited IQ
- Generally negative attitudes
- Impulsive
- Speaking of plans that lack feasibility

While you will likely observe some of what is described here about dangerous people's functioning, you will want to verify what other professionals who have a history with the person know. It may be necessary to seek psychological and psychiatric evaluations if the database on the person's functioning is limited.

Substance Use

Substance use is not a casual aspect of the dangerous person's life so it deserves special consideration in your assessment. You may find observed, recorded, reported substance use problems. Since "de-stabilizers" often trigger violence and acting out on others it is common that substance use occurs prior to and during violence. Dangerous people likely have "pre-drinking expectations" that support acceptance of physical means and aggression as a solution separate

from and existing prior to the substance use. The substance use simply reinforces these pre-existing attitudes and pre-dispositions. The use of substances creates un-inhibiting effects releasing impulses and rage.

Similar Contexts

Context can mean everything in fully assessing and understanding a person's functioning. Therefore, it is important to consider whether the context that exists now for the person you are evaluating is similar to a context in which previous violence occurred. Here you might think of context as including people within the person's life situation and the nature of those relationships; financial and other security concerns; and the presence of de-stabilizers like substance use.

Means to Commit Violence

Your assessment should also take into account natural or developed means to commit violence. The opening case example described Mick as imposing but did not distinguish whether that was socially or physically. With respect to "means to commit violence", you can be thinking more of the power/physical side of the person. Here are some things to think about concerned with the means to commit violence.

- Physical strength
- Weapons
- Experienced fighter
- Over compensation and personal identity: the tough guy image.

Implications for Safety Intervention

Dangerous people are not available, accessible and self revealing. Often they may come across as anything but dangerous. While we don't want you to over

react thinking there is a dangerous person behind every door, it is critical to be tuned into the possibility and highly sensitive to clues and reports from others. An early and diligent assessment is crucial to reach a judgment about the presence of a dangerous person before he or she acts. Aggressive pursuit in terms of timely and abundant information is what is required.

When you suspect a person may fit what we've discussed here, it is paramount that you control the person's access to the children in the home. Be highly conservative about safety management.

Guard against couple alliance. In our example, Melissa is aligned with Mick perhaps because of fear, dependence or some other relationship dynamic. Even though she is likely highly vulnerable to Mick if he turns out to be a dangerous person, I will not chance Lisa's safety by being in any way fooled by Melissa's alignment to Mick.

Dangerous people have experience in dealing with people who "are trying to catch and deal with them." Dangerous people also have experience in taking advantage of others. Their social skills and deception may be advanced. So, be prepared for manipulation and lying.

Finally, we repeat the idea of not over diagnosing. Seek and build "a data base" that provides rich and thorough information about the person for whom you have concerns. Consult with your supervisor and others as you share the information you've collected and the conclusions you've reached. Seek from them input and inquiry that challenges in order to support your position.

If you wish to study more about dangerous people, we encourage you to look at the work on this subject by Joel Milner, Jacquelyn Campbell, Christopher Webster, Barbara Limandri, Daniel Sheridan, John Monahan, Kevin Douglas, Derek Eaves and Stephen Hart.