

Supervising the Safety Intervention Process: Part II

Introduction

Last month, “Supervising the Safety Intervention Process Part 1” considered a supervisor’s responsibilities for safety intervention at intake (receipt of a referral) and the first contact with a family. This month we focus on the supervisory responsibilities concerned with safety intervention that occurs during and at the completion of the initial assessment. (We use the label initial assessment in this article as interchangeable with the term investigation.)

A supervisor’s responsibilities concerned with safety intervention during and at the conclusion of the initial assessment include:

- Consulting with a worker while the initial assessment is proceeding;
- Assist workers with information gathering challenges;
- Consulting with the worker on the safety analysis that occurs at the conclusion of the initial assessment;
- Approving the safety intervention based on the conclusions reached during the initial assessment; and
- Providing support and guidance to staff at any point that legal intervention is required.

Supervision during the Initial Assessment

What’s the most essential product that results during the initial assessment? Information. Any decision is only as effective as the quality of information that is available to inform judgments. You have to have sufficient information to make necessary decisions and take appropriate action. Therefore, the most crucial responsibility for a supervisor is to assure that pertinent, relevant and adequate information is gathered by caseworkers from caregivers, children and the family network. Is it surprising that we believe that? Some might believe that reviewing and approving initial assessment decisions is a more important supervisory task.

But follow our thinking on this. Initial assessment is concerned with arriving at these decisions: a) did maltreatment occur or is it occurring; b) are children at risk of maltreatment; c) are children unsafe; d) does the family have emergency needs; and e) is the family in need of continuing services. The quality of all these decisions is directly and absolutely dependent on the quality of the information the agency has about the family. The quality (and sufficiency) of the information a worker collects completely influences the accuracy of safety judgments. During initial assessment, supervisors must promote and give direction concerning timely and effective information collection that fully informs judgments about safety intervention. That is what must be done. Here's how it can be that done.

Supervisory Involvement

As a supervisor you must be sufficiently involved with a worker to know and understand what he or she knows about a family. Involvement begins through face-to-face preparation that initiates information collection. Workers (new and tenured) need to be made ready for what information they need to collect and how to collect it. Supervisors can consult with workers in early initial assessment activity to consider:

- What to focus on? The following six questions represent the fundamental areas of study necessary to effective safety assessment. Understand all you can about these *points of inquiry*:
 - the extent of maltreatment;
 - the circumstances that surround the maltreatment child(ren) functioning: temperament, capacities, limitations, vulnerability;
 - adult (caregivers) functioning: life management, emotional and behavior control, problem solving, perceptions, stress management, social relationships, mental health, substance use;

- parenting styles: knowledge, skill, satisfaction, expectations, capacities, limitations; and
 - disciplinary practices: intent, methods, expectations, orientation.
- How to overcome barriers? Effective decision-making may be compromised by a worker's inability to access critical information. As a supervisor it is important to know a worker's strengths and limitation and plan to effectively address and enhance a worker's approach, style and technique for intervening with families. On a case by case basis, assist workers in dealing with the following common barriers:
 - caregiver resistance;
 - communication difficulties;
 - access to family members;
 - location and circumstances that much be managed;
 - management of one's own self;
 - premature judgments and conclusions;
 - worker bias; and
 - reasoning vs. rationalization.
 - Who to seek out?
 - the best sources of information;
 - the order of people to be interviewed; and
 - the use of information sources to confirm and corroborate.

Supervisory involvement continues through routinely reviewing and discussing the information collection objectives and challenges, reflecting on the

status of what is known, the qualification of the value of what is known, and the resetting of expectations about what information remains to be collected.

With respect to supervisory involvement that produces sufficient information from the initial assessment, there are a couple of things that are of interest concerning supervisory behavior: relationship and modeling.

The Supervisory Relationship

Think about what you know and trust about what a worker knows based on the depth of involvement you have with a worker with respect to a single case. Think about the confidence and trust you can have about what a worker knows in a single case based on what you know about the worker's capabilities on all cases. Here we have two criterion of a working supervisory relationship: the immediate dimension (as determined by a single case situation) and the general dimension (as influenced by having studied the worker's approach and proficiency over many cases.) Both dimensions can be used to establish confidence you have about what is known about a case that is right before you. Relying on one or the other can be a mistake. A relationship is built off of individual experiences but becomes deeper from the accumulation of all experiences. Likewise a supervisor's confidence about what a worker knows in a particular case includes the involvement the supervisor has with the worker on that single case and also the general involvement a supervisor has with a worker related to all cases the two have collaborated on.

Supervisory Modeling

Think about what message your involvement with a worker sends to that worker about the necessary involvement he or she must have to collect sufficient information. For a worker to know and understand a family – to collect sufficient information – we might all expect a worker to spend a few to several hours with the family. How much supervisory time should be spent with a worker to encourage information collection; to help the worker understand the family; and to gain an understanding of what the worker knows and believes? How will staff interpret a message calling for diligence in their work if supervisory involvement with them is limited – if it is on the fly or not at all? During the initial assessment the supervisor can be clear and directive about what information must be gathered and understood in order to effectively assess and address safety threats. The supervisor can be encouraging by giving guidance and consultation about information collection practice that will reveal clarity about child safety. The supervisor can be diligent and invested in a timely and highly conscious manner. Such involvement provides a model a worker can translate as viable in his or her work with a family.

Criteria for Sufficiency

Supervisors as well as workers must have a clear sense about what constitutes “sufficient” information for initial assessment decisions. The following criterion applies to the six assessment questions or the points of inquiry necessary for effective decision-making. The criteria are simple. When reading worker documentation or conducting discussions with workers about what they know about a family consider the following:

- Breadth – Is the worker’s understanding of the family based on information that covers the critical points of inquiry (maltreatment, surrounding circumstances of maltreatment, child functioning, adult

functioning, parenting general and discipline)? The information gathered about a family is comprehensive.

- Depth – Is the worker’s understanding based on facts and profundity that is explained by probing and diligent consideration of pertinent information from each point of inquiry? Information related to the six assessment questions is precise and detailed.
- Reliable – Is the information the worker possesses trustworthy and dependable with respect to reflecting the reality of the family and correct answers to the points of inquiry? Information is reasonably believable, factual and can be justified.
- Pertinent – Is the information relevant, significant and applicable to revealing the presence of safety threats to a child? A worker knows what is important. The information is relevant to decision-making.
- Objective – Is the information factual, actual and unbiased? A worker knows what exists without interpretation or value judgment.
- Clear - Is the information unambiguous? A worker knows what is apparent and unmistakable.
- Association - Does the worker understand how information is connected and inter-related? A worker knows how different things occurring in a family are linked.
- Reconcile – Has the worker resolved apparent distortion and differences in information among the points of inquiry? A worker is able to reconcile discrepancies within case information or family system dynamics.
- Supported – Is the information confirmed or corroborated by reliable sources? A worker is confident about what the information means – what can be believed and understood.

Supervisory Assistance

Beyond information collection during initial assessment, supervisors also help workers with urgent intervention issues, namely responding to the awareness of present danger and assisting with legal intervention. The support

provided by supervisors concerning taking appropriate action whenever present danger is identified is addressed in the November 2004 article.

When the jurisdiction of the court has been invoked at any time during the initial assessment it is done so because of some question related to child safety. Supervisor activity related to helping with legal intervention can include:

- Processing the decision to invoke court authority;
- Approving of the decision to remove a child or seek court oversight;
- Approving going to court;
- Providing step by step guidance to less experience workers regarding necessary documentation and processes required to invoke court jurisdiction;
- Assistance to experienced workers and less experienced workers to actually produce documentation and take responsibility to expedite the process;
- Consultation with attorneys representing the agency's interest;
- Advocacy for the worker's position; and
- Attendance with workers in various proceedings.

When legal intervention becomes necessary during an initial assessment, the supervisor is the expert on all matters concerned with safety intervention. This includes being able to effectively understand and communicate the agency's position concerning specific case conditions that are pertinent to the concern for a child's safety. As we've said before with respect to the supervisor and safety intervention – *the buck stops here*.

While on the subject of court involvement, it is also worth noting the important role supervisors have for prompting staff to consider less intrusive intervention alternatives to court involvement. While the need for court involvement is often the best or only option for assuring child safety, best practice dictates the need to at least consider the potential for engaging a family in a less

intrusive agency response. Timely supervisory consultation can help to stimulate ideas and suggestions and balance extreme reactions in decision-making.

Assisting with Safety Analysis

In the November article we discussed safety intervention at the point of initial contact with a family. When children are determined to be unsafe at the first contact of the initial assessment or during the initial assessment CPS takes protective action. The protective action serves as a holding action or “stop gap” action intended to suspend what is going on in a family that threatens child safety long enough to assure that workers are able to gather sufficient information related to the six questions. A protective action is not a “formal” safety plan. The need for a protective action is based on time-limited narrow information (presenting danger) and the protective action’s primary purpose is to buy a worker more time to adequately complete initial assessment interviews and assess family conditions.

Regardless of whether a protective action was implemented at some point during the initial assessment process, at the conclusion of the initial assessment once it has been determined that a child is unsafe (based on an understanding of the six assessment questions) a safety plan will need to be promptly developed. But what type of safety plan is necessary and will be adequate for controlling identified threats to child safety? This question is related to an important and often overlooked aspect of the safety intervention process. Determining what type of safety plan is necessary for a particular family is a result of a worker’s safety intervention analysis. Formal safety plans are formed and implemented after a safety analysis has occurred.

A safety intervention analysis is a step by step consideration of how safety threats are manifested in a family; whether there are family capacities and options that can mitigate against threats; whether conditions prevail within a home that would support an in home safety plan; whether actions, services, providers and other resources are available and accessible to implement an in

home safety plan; and if an in home plan is not possible what provisions are indicated for the creation of a combination in home – out of home safety plan. The safety analysis occurs simultaneously with the other final steps that draw an initial assessment to a conclusion (e.g. consulting with supervisor; documentation, completion of risk assessment; reaching various findings, etc.)

The initial assessment worker is responsible for the safety analysis; the supervisor consults as needed when a safety analysis occurs. While we are not seeing this sort of supervisor practice occurring very often in practice, when it does occur it is within the context of consultation and discussion between the initial assessment worker and the supervisor.

A supervisor can come to the safety analysis deliberation well informed about a family if his or her involvement with a worker proceeds along the lines that we identified above. So, a supervisor can already have some idea about the quality of the information that has been collected and what the worker understands about the information. During the safety analysis the supervisor role changes to one of helping the worker sort out what he or she knows and what it means. The supervisor poses the questions that must be clarified to arrive at answers about how to protect a child through a sufficient safety plan. The job is not to take over – not to make the decision for the worker. The job is to help the worker arrive at his or her own conclusions leading to a safety plan and response. The challenge can be described as follows:

- Can we take all that we know and filter out that which informs us about safety threats and possible family or agency responses?
- Can we identify that which is the most significant or weighty information when it comes to assessing safety threats?
- Can we identify that which is the most significant or weighty information when it comes to assessing safety threats?
- Can we understand in precise ways how safety threats are occurring as explained by all that we know about a family?

- Can we examine and scrutinize what within a family might serve as an option, strength or resource that can be applied as part of safety intervention?
- Can we breakdown information in ways that provide us confidence about the family situation, the family setting, motivation, willingness to cooperate, capacity to participate and other critical ingredients to creating a safety plan?
- Can we use what we know to seek out family and community resources, people and services that can be accessed to participate in a safety intervention?
- Do we know enough about the conditions of the family that affect safety and what are the implications for being able to protect the child in the home? If not what do we know that informs other alternative safety responses?

Approving the Safety Plan

There are a couple of responsibilities associated with approval of safety plans at the conclusion of the initial assessment:

Has the worker completed all the work correctly?

As an initial assessment case assignment nears its conclusion, it is important to consider again if case information has been completed, informed decisions have been made based on an understanding of available information, a safety plan has been created and is determined to be sufficient, and thorough documentation has occurred. When a supervisor and worker review and approve an initial assessment they are approving the quality and acceptability of all the actions, decisions and results of the initial assessment worker's performance. Therefore, that includes everything the worker did concerning safety intervention. A supervisor and worker should reflect on the following questions prior to concluding the initial assessment assignment:

- Has the worker completed all the work related to safety intervention correctly?
- Did the worker involve himself appropriately in the case and with the family?
- Did the worker act in a timely way and expend reasonable levels of effort as suggested by safety related information?
- Did the worker involve all pertinent parties in the initial assessment process?
- Did the worker perform acceptable professional practice and judgment?
- Did the worker assure the child was safe while the initial assessment proceeded?
- Did the worker gather sufficient information?
- Did the worker demonstrate competence in his knowledge and skill related to safety intervention?
- Did the worker document safety assessment and safety plan in accordance with acceptable practice?
- Did the worker involve the family network and appropriate others in pursuing answers to protecting the children and forming a safety plan?
- Did the worker follow policy and procedure related to safety intervention occurring during initial assessment?

Is the safety plan sufficient to protect the child from threats of severe harm?

We often have had conversations with supervisors over what signing a form means in terms of supervisory approval. It's no small matter. The signature expresses a great deal more than a "sign off" or work movement or processing activity as in "getting it off my desk" and on to the next fellow.

Supervisory approval of a safety plan means that the supervisor takes responsibility for whatever outcomes may result from the safety plan. While it is true that workers are responsible for the results of safety plans they create, it is also true that supervisors are equally responsible if not more so. Pretty scary,

huh? The stakes are high. Safety plans must be crafted in such an exact and rigorous fashion that all those involved have confidence that the safety plan will keep a child safe. Supervisory approval is a statement that everything that reasonably could be considered has been brought to bear in arriving at the conclusion that the safety plan will work. It will keep the child safe.

The supervisor's approval of a safety plan is a statement of conclusion that is based: on her expertise in safety intervention; her knowledge of policy and procedure; her understanding of the family based on deliberation with the worker; her review of the worker's performance; her confidence in the worker's competence; and her specific consideration of the content of the safety plan and how it reasonably can be judged to work to protect the child.

The supervisory approval of a safety plan is a significant thing.

Summary

These are hard times for all CPS staff with respect to job expectations, standards for performance, liability, unsafe children and workload demand. Prioritization may seem practical to some, but to supervisors and workers it can be either an overwhelming challenge or totally unthinkable. Here we have briefly posed some of what it takes for effective supervision concerned with safety intervention during and at the conclusion of initial assessment. Notably at the heart of this article are time, effort and involvement. In many places policy or expected practice requires supervisors to meet with their workers once per week in conferences and to be available to consult daily. It is hard to meet those expectations and yet even those expectations may be a bit light in order to get at the level of involvement we are suggesting here. We say these things to demonstrate that we recognize that for the most part considerable distance can exist between what should be and what can be. Yet it is our hope that by continuing to hold up what should be the standard we strive for, we will certainly achieve it in many if not most cases.

In Future Articles We Will Explore Supervision Related to the Safety Management during Ongoing CPS.