

Provisional Safety Management

Introduction

Belief precedes action. What we do when intervening with families is driven by what we believe. While we seek to be scientific in safety intervention, there is no denying that our beliefs and values concerned with caregiver rights, safety-related family conditions and the purpose of intervention are and should be profound influences in what we do and how we do it.

Discussions are occurring across the country as to the nature, purpose and scope of safety intervention and safety plans that result in the management of safety threats. Archaic practices concerned with safety decision-making continue to have some influence. For instance, in some places, if a child is judged to be safe, he remains at home; if a child is judged to be unsafe, he is removed and placed outside the home. This is an old but traditional way of thinking about child protection. In some places, action taken by CPS represents a safety plan only if it is an in-home safety plan. In other words, out-of-home placement is viewed as something other than a safety plan per se. We've heard of distinctions such as an in-home safety plan being the responsibility of the family and an out-of-home safety plan being the responsibility of CPS. Some people think that safety plans are short-term or brief, while others consider it reasonable that a safety plan could last well into the life of the case even up to or near the point of closing a case. Questions exist as to whether in-home safety plans are voluntary or coerced.

These differences suggest a lack of certainty and clarity concerning the beliefs, values and assumptions that serve as the foundation for safety intervention and management. As we begin a series of monthly articles on ongoing safety management, we thought it useful to set forth a way of thinking and believing—a

conceptual frame of reference—about safety intervention and ongoing safety management.

Provisional Safety Management

It is our belief that safety intervention and management must be *provisional*. Since provisional is the key idea and word, we should take a closer look.

Provisional safety management refers to specific plans, arrangements and actions taken by CPS for the time being based on a) the presence of threats to child safety and b) the absence of sufficient caregiver protective capacities to assure protection.

Provisional safety management stays in place pending a more permanent arrangement, namely returning protective responsibilities to caregivers or other permanency options beyond the child's own home or family.

The importance of the belief and its translation into actual intervention is that it assures that the question of child safety and caregiver protective capacity always remains alive. It promotes the point of view that child safety and caregiver protective capacity possess potential for being different, thus requiring different CPS safety management responses.

But, perhaps most important, this idea values the family unit and the role of caregivers both in terms of being the executors of the family system in general and, specifically, as responsible for protecting their children. Provisional safety management emphasizes constant attention to family member propinquity. Do you know what that means? Propinquity means nearness, closeness, proximity, close relationship and even blood relationship.

Characteristics of Provisional Safety Management

For safety intervention and safety management to be provisional, it *must be a living, breathing thing*. It must be dynamic. From the point that a child's safety is judged to be in jeopardy until such time as caregiver protective capacity is sufficient to assure a child's safety, CPS must be self-motivated, lively and active by a) staying tuned in to how safety threats are occurring; b) considering how caregiver protective capacities can be deployed; c) seeking out resources within the family network that can contribute; and d) being constantly open to increasing or decreasing the level of effort in safety plans in order to meet the safety needs of a child that are apparent.

Provisional safety management *operates as a substitute*, as an alternative needed due to diminished caregiver protective capacities. We occasionally use a sports team metaphor to illustrate this point. Sports teams began each game with their "starters," the best players on the team. During the course of the sporting event, a player, sometimes even the star player, leaves the game because of fatigue or even injury. The player's athletic capacity is diminished. The person needs a rest. So a substitute enters the game. The substitute's role is not to replace the "first stringer" indefinitely or totally. The substitute player acts in a provisional role until the "first stringer's" capacity becomes restored. At that time, the substitute's responsibility has been met. If you think of a child's caregiver as being comparable to the player who needs to sit out the game for awhile, it will be easy for you to consider the CPS role and safety intervention as a substitute arrangement.

Provisional safety management *is conditional*. Those conditions are established by the definition for an unsafe child. A child is unsafe when present or impending danger exists and caregiver protective capacities are insufficient to assure protection of a child. Safety management is necessary at any time and for any duration based on the conditions within a family that are consistent with that definition. At such time as threats to child safety no longer exist or a caregiver's

protective capacities are sufficient to assure protection, safety management is no longer required. Safety management is qualified by what is going on in a family associated with child safety.

Provisional safety management *is an interim intervention*. The interim nature of safety intervention should be thought of within the context of other characteristics discussed here. It is true that interim and even provisional can mean short-term to people. That is not the meaning we believe in or that is suggested by what may be needed to control safety threats. The idea of brief or short-term safety plans is a dangerous one. Short-term as a guiding influence in safety management is consistent with a failure to recognize that the purpose of a safety plan is to manage and control safety threats. That purpose cannot be regulated by a length of time but by the existence of certain conditions as outlined above. Concern about safety plans remaining in place far too long—beyond their need—likely contributes to the idea of short-term. However, the logical and effective way to assure that safety plans remain in effect only so long as they are needed is to regulate their existence by conditions rather than by time. With respect to safety management as an interim intervention, avoid thinking about how long the intervention might last. Think of an interim intervention as temporary, intermediary involvement occurring between when a child is judged to be unsafe and when a caregiver can be restored to providing protection for her child. During provisional safety management, CPS is in an acting status; CPS is acting as a protective entity until such time as that responsibility can be returned fully to the child's caregiver. Interim intervention reinforces the opposite of taking a permanent action (or even something that by default becomes a permanent action as evidenced by children who remain far too long in out-of-home placement).

Provisional safety management *is caregiver centered*. The focal point of provisional safety management is the caregiver. Caregivers participate in all aspects of safety planning and safety management insofar as they are interested, willing and able. Caregivers should be well-informed about threats to child safety

that CPS has assessed; caregivers should be involved in considering options that are available to assure the child is protected; caregivers should be supported to identify resources and people who can contribute to safety management; caregivers should always be informed about what is required for safety management, how safety management is going, and any changes that might be anticipated. The opinions and observations of caregivers should be sought out routinely as a part of keeping them the focus of safety management. Caregivers should be encouraged and supported in their understanding that safety management is a temporary intervention that includes the expectation that they eventually resume responsibility for protecting their children.

Provisional safety management *employs the least intrusive measures* necessary to assure a child is protected. Provisional safety management considers, uses and rules out options that are family- and home-centered before proceeding to more intrusive plans. Provisional safety management seeks to implement safety plans that are versatile and robust as exemplified by variations in methods from in-home to temporarily out-of-home to out-of-home with planned intentions back to in-home options. Variation includes use of the family network, lay people, volunteers, para-professionals and professionals to serve in a safety plan. Provisional safety management remains on guard to step from more intrusive safety intervention down to less intrusive safety intervention.

Provisional safety management *is not voluntary*. Because a question has arisen in the field lately about whether in-home safety plans are voluntary, we decided to make sure we were clear on this issue. Provisional safety management is needed only when threats to child safety exist with insufficient caregiver protective capacities. When those circumstances exist, CPS is responsible to assure that a child is protected. The very fact that those circumstances have been judged to be present means that caregivers cannot be expected to be responsible to assure a child is protected. The assessment of and conclusion about safety threats and caregiver protective capacities means that family conditions are such that CPS is responsible for and in a position legally to protect a child – in a

position to invoke the court's authority. Caregivers do not have a choice about whether a child judged to be unsafe will be protected. In that sense, provisional safety management is not volitional. But caregivers do have a choice about safety management options CPS can offer or that can be negotiated between CPS and caregivers. From a provisional safety management perspective, those options can be varied as we've pointed out and may or may not need to include court-ordered intervention.

Best Practice

Here is the best practice standard for provisional safety management:

CPS safety management must take on a cooperative and assertive role in regulating and maintaining the objectives of safety plans involving families and providers in assuring the utilization of necessary safety services at the level of effort required. Nothing less, nothing more.

- **Vigilance** is really the standard for best practice. It requires that safety management is a constant activity, always in motion. Vigilance in safety management exists when the following occur:
 - **Promptness**. This refers to taking up the responsibility for safety management immediately upon receiving responsibility for a safety plan and attending swiftly to issues related to safety.
 - **Alertness**. This refers to focus on new threats to safety, changes in the intensity of conditions associated with threats and changes in family functioning and membership that influence safety.

- Diligence. This refers to making safety assessment and safety management a constant priority including effort and energy invested in overseeing the case, communicating with family members and providers and being personally involved in the case.
- Timeliness. This refers to punctuality in all safety management, in routine safety assessment, and in immediate response.

Summary

CPS' objective concerning protecting children is a stop-gap action. There is no intent to replace the caregiver as the protector. The intent is to provide an alternative as the caregiver assumes greater degrees of responsibility and independence in the protective function. In protecting children, CPS substitutes for what the caregiver cannot or will not do. Depending on changes within family circumstances and caregiver capacity, the need for protection changes and safety management is increased or decreased accordingly. CPS protection as represented in a safety plan and safety management is what exists until caregivers resume greater responsibility and independence. Provisional safety management is an "in-between" action. Safety management should always be viewed as temporary, not short-term but subject to change at any time. Provisional safety management exists in a constant state of flux, always amenable to adjustment based on involvement with and understanding of caregivers and their families.

Regarding provisional safety management, it is important to remember overseeing and governing safety plans is as involved as child safety is important. You cannot be effective at safety management from a distance—you must be involved and active. Initial and ongoing safety management is CPS' responsibility, not a family or provider responsibility.