

# **Information Gathering: The Challenge in Safety Decision Making**

## **Introduction**

In April 2003, we wrote about the foundation for safety decision making. In that article we wrote: *Information is the foundation of safety assessment*. So if information is the foundation for safety assessment, how do you establish that foundation? That may be the greatest challenge in safety intervention and safety decision making. How do you approach information gathering? How do you use yourself in a skillful, deliberate manner in order to gather sufficient, pertinent information which will support effective safety decision making?

In that April 2003 article and in other articles, we've emphasized that sufficient information gathering can be organized around six assessment questions:

- What is the extent of maltreatment?
- What circumstances surround the maltreatment?
- How does the child(ren) function?
- How do adult caregivers function generally?
- What are the parenting practices within the home?
- What are the disciplinary practices within the home?

Impending danger can be revealed when individual and family functioning and home life are examined carefully and thoroughly in relation to these assessment questions.

The six assessment questions represent “what” information you should seek to collect. The challenge that remains is “how” do you go about gathering such information?

We decided to provide this emphasis to information gathering because routinely supervisors are mentioning to us that this is the biggest challenge for their workers during safety intervention. Supervisors also tell us that information gathering, interviewing, and similar areas of staff development receive less priority and are less available. This article begins a series devoted to how to go about collecting information associated with safety intervention generally and safety decision making specifically. This series will cover some essentials of effective information gathering:

- Use of Self
- Approach
- Deliberate Information Gathering
- Guided Conversations

We'll begin with you as the central influence on effective information gathering.

### **Use of Self**

The most effective tool to information gathering is you! It's not some fancy method or skill or trick or art. It's you. Now, certainly, effectiveness is enhanced by skill development, the approach you use and so forth, but effectiveness truly is most associated with you as a person and how you use yourself. How you use yourself occurs as a result of who you are. Who you are is obviously quite complicated and comprised of many things. Here we consider those things most associated with child welfare work generally and information gathering specifically.

### *Personal Values*

What you believe is more important than the truth. The values you hold are more defining than what you know or the methods you use. When you are

seeking to understand someone and his situation, your values profoundly influence a) how you behave during the interaction, b) what the person reveals about himself and c) the meaning of the revelation to you. In some ways, our values form our *out picture* of a person. In other words, we see in the person what we expect to see based on our values. So, say, your beliefs are such that you mistrust people in general. Then, it is likely that your tendency is to see a caregiver who is sharing her approach to parenting as untrustworthy—likely lying or distorting. Since values always end up being expressed and therefore communicated to the caregiver, you can imagine the negative effect questionable values can have on information gathering. Alternatively, the right values can have a positive effect on information gathering.

Consider whether you hold these values dear to your heart:

- The right to be me

Every caregiver who mistreats a child or fails to protect a child is unique from all others; each caregiver you seek to understand has absolute personhood. While having a problem with safety in a family may be something non protective caregivers have in common, their individual nature and circumstances are their own. This value is concerned with a strong belief in the reality of individuality.

- The right to feelings

Children who are unsafe and their caregivers own their feelings and have the need for acceptance of those feelings no matter what the emotions are. Those you seek to understand must be able to purposefully express their feelings without fear of retribution or reaction.

- People are worthy

Can you see value and worthiness in a person who does not protect her young? To truly understand a non protective caregiver, children within a family or other family members you must recognize and accept each person's basic worth as a fellow human being separate from any behavior, habit or characteristic. The value related to whether you see people as worthy or unworthy is expressed in virtually everything done or said during interaction with family members.

- The need not to be judged

Judging actions and behaviors in a moral sense is not the work of child welfare. Assigning guilt or innocence does not enhance information gathering or understanding of caregivers and their situations. We can understand and appreciate that all behavior is purposeful, even that associated with safety threats or failure to protect. Nonjudgmental information gathering helps you to understand the purpose of behavior in order to better be able to do something about it. Caregivers might say, *"If you want to know me and my family, don't judge me."*

- The right to determine the course of our lives

Even non protective caregivers have the right to pursue their choices and determine their life experience. In child welfare intervention, caregivers' choices about actions and also consequences should remain with them. A caregiver can decide to act or not act in accordance with what influences him, and he can be helped to make such decisions based on a full understanding of the consequences, both good and bad.

- The need for privacy and kept secrets

Family members “own” all the information which is about them. Revealing intimate details, flaws, aspirations, experiences and so forth only occurs when a sense of trust prevails whereby family members have reason to believe that what they say about themselves will be considered personal and private. This value influences you to be open about a person’s rights; about what information you require, why you need it and what you will do with it; about what information you are not at liberty to keep confidential.

### *Personal Characteristics*

Do you want to experience children, parents and family members opening up to you and sharing the important information you need to make good safety decisions? Well, who you are individually can contribute to that outcome. There are distinctive qualities that you may already possess or that you can develop that can serve to support effective information gathering.

Are you empathic? Empathy, as you likely know, is the trait of experiencing a situation and emotion of another person in similar fashion to what a person is experiencing. Related to safety intervention, it is whether you can get inside the shoes and skin of a person who is failing as a parent; it is understanding the terror a child feels; it is realizing in a deep and profound way the difficulty and challenge a family is experiencing during the CPS process.

Are you respectful? Respect is a personal, sort of internal characteristic. You feel it toward others and it compels you to behave in very clear and specific ways. You honor a caregiver’s individuality, her rights and her privacy through acknowledgement. Fairness and equity guide your actions. You value a non protective parent’s history, experience and point of view. You consider a child’s or

caregiver's thoughts and feelings as important. Your level of attention and effort to understand a non protective caregiver is an expression of your respect.

Are you a warm person? Warmth is expressed toward others through such things as smiling, physical contact and physical and social proximity. Let's just think about this personal characteristic from our own perspective. We are more likely to be open and sharing with someone who is friendly, kind, sincere and genial. We are less likely to get into intimate details, revelations or deep concerns with someone who is detached, aloof and disinterested. Simple. So, are you a warm person?

Are you genuine? A substance abusing, non protective caregiver joins you in conversation about who she is as a person and what has brought about the dangerous situation in her family. She sees you as a real person, authentic in every way....not pretentious. She experiences you as open, sincere, honest and also frank. As she communicates with you, she senses congruence between what you say, what you mean and how you present yourself. These things she sees and feels helps her to gain a growing sense of trust about you. These things influence her being able to open up to give you information you need to make safety decisions.

Are you concrete? Sometimes considering a person to be concrete is considered a negative thing. Here it is not so. Let's look at the meaning of this personal characteristic. Like genuineness, concrete has to do with being real. Are you a person that acts and speaks with reality in mind? If you are concrete, in terms of our meaning here, you deal with people (behavior and communication) in specific and definite ways. You avoid abstraction in favor of what is tangible and easier to recognize and understand. Being concrete means you understand things in ways that enable you to explain them. When conversing with a person who is threatening to his child, your concreteness is evident in your purposefulness and confidence about your interaction with the person.

Are you self-disclosing? Like being concrete, self-disclosure is closely associated with genuineness. Interrogators gather information. Probably the closest interrogators get to self-disclosure is for purposes of manipulation. So, self-disclosure among interrogators isn't very real or genuine. Interrogators have no interest in revealing themselves as real, living, breathing people whose own experience assists them in understanding the life and experience of someone else. You are not an interrogator. Your need to know about what's going on with a non protective parent is matched with your need to understand. Sufficient information gathering depends on deep and broad knowledge and understanding. Self-disclosure as a low key expression of your self, your experience and your personal ability to understand serves as a prompt and encouragement for caregivers and children to share. Are you comfortable with sharing relevant experiences with others as a means of engaging conversation and gaining understanding?

Are you spontaneous? In interviewing and counseling, effectiveness is associated with responsiveness and dealing with things in the immediate. Spontaneity is associated with openness and flexibility which are two other pretty important personal characteristics. A non protective parent often wishes to focus attention on a specific area of concern and a spontaneous, unfettered response on your part can have several effects. Can you identify some possible effects on the information gathering process? How about these things: relaxes the person, reduces your profile and power, supports the significance of the person's concern, and shows respect. What else? All these things and other potential effects contribute to engaging the person in information gathering. It is a good thing if you are a spontaneous person and can begin where the caregiver or child is.

### *Personal Authority*

You have your own sense of authority personally and professionally. You also have your own adjustment to authority which probably qualifies your sense of and use of authority. We can be simple here regarding authority and safety-

related information gathering. Expressions and exertions of authority inhibit information gathering. The bossier you are the less information you'll get from children and caregivers. And...you can expect poorer quality of information if you are overly official, interfering and domineering. Don't be fooled to think you can intimidate people into opening up and giving you the critical information you need to make good safety decisions. Certainly, you possess official power and authority inherent in your position. So the challenge is to lower your profile, seek common ground, avoid power plays and side step limit setting as a means of coercing participation and information giving. Join with the non protective caregiver to explore her life and experience, her perceptions and points of view, her fears and difficulties and her capacities and potential. In order to join with a child or a parent you must reduce the feelings and perceptions of hierarchy. Remember this. People who believe that their personal power and autonomy is threatened will not share information freely, totally or accurately.

### *Personal Motivation*

Highly motivated people make better conversationalists and information gatherers. You know, motivated people are simply more interesting than unmotivated people. How would a non protective mom experience a highly motivated information gatherer? Well, you'd be very interested in everything she had to say. You'd be creative in how you approach learning about her. You would feel compelled to understand her and to make sure she knew that was your motivation. You'd be dynamic and energetic. You'd believe what you were doing was very important and that she was very important too. She would see that you were willing to take your time, to deliberate, to listen and inquire further, and she'd really feel the depth of your interest and concern. Of course, what you were motivated toward would make a huge difference as to whether she was willing to provide you with what you need to know. Say, for instance, that you were motivated to remove her kids and see that she is punished, and you could be very highly motivated in that direction. It's possible because occasionally you find such folks in child welfare. Okay. If she experiences that as the source of your

motivation, forget getting very good information. Alternatively, let's say your motivation is related to her best interests, the best interests of her children and the best interests of her family. Now, you can see that might have a totally different influence on the information gathering process. Yes, it would.

### *Personal Consciousness*

If you are self-conscious, you will be a better information gatherer. That sounds controversial and not true. We don't think of self-conscious people as being very effective folks. We sometimes think of them as weak or self-absorbed. So, let's clarify. Consciousness refers to awareness, realization and perceptiveness. Consciousness applies as a concept associated with our ability to read reality accurately. Being self-conscious can be a terrific thing with respect to our self-awareness and self-management. Once again, we emphasize that if a personal characteristic of yours is self-consciousness, you will be a better information gatherer. Here's why. You will seek ways to use yourself purposefully. You will notice the effect you are having on the caregiver you are interviewing and will make adjustments accordingly. You will think about how you present yourself, what you say and how you behave. You will recognize and make use of things you do well. You will be confident about making available what is likeable and compelling about yourself. While remaining responsive, you will think carefully about ways and skills that you can deploy to encourage participation and stimulate participation and sharing. You will be alert, highly focused and tuned into the caregiver or child. These things make a huge difference in information gathering.

### **Closing**

There is plenty more that could be written about use of self. It would be a worthy pursuit for you to look further into this critical area fundamental to good information gathering. Hopefully, you've seen what a tremendous impact and even inspiration personal values, characteristics and so forth can have on your

performance in safety-related information gathering. Many people are blessed naturally or through experience with personal qualities that provide them with a personal foundation and means to be better at their job. Others of us can take an inventory of ourselves for consideration of development and refinement. For, you know, all that has been discussed here is amenable to change in a person. In the same sense that we have a responsibility to learn interpersonal methods and skills to enhance information gathering, we should work on ourselves so that the use of ourselves contributes rather than impedes information gathering. *Remember, you are the most effective tool you have for effective safety-related information gathering.*

Next month we consider the “approach to information gathering.”