

# **Protective Capacities**

(Reprint of *Protective Capacities*, July 2003)

## **Introduction**

In January, when we started these monthly features, we defined child safety as:

*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.*

It is a two-sided definition. Kids are safe because there are no threats or kids are safe because their parents or caregivers have sufficient protective capacities to manage any threats to safety that are present. No threats or sufficient protective capacities.

*Protective capacity* is a CPS concept that has been around for a long time but just got this label within the past few years. Fundamentally, the concept is concerned with the question of whether a parent can and will protect his or her child. You may have heard of terms like protective factors or mitigating strengths. Same thing.

The concept of protective capacity is a powerful one for all of CPS – both safety intervention and remedial treatment. For this month, we'll stay focused on the relevance to safety intervention.

## **What is Protective Capacity?**

A protective capacity is a specific quality that can be observed and understood to be part of the way a parent thinks, feels and acts that makes him or her protective. Here's a definition for caregiver protective capacities:

*Personal and parenting behavioral, cognitive and emotional characteristics that specifically and directly can be associated with being protective of one's young.*

These are unique strengths that contribute to being protective. Some might think of these characteristics as somewhere close to an instinct for protectiveness similar to a mother bear's protective nature particularly with regard to priority and intensity.

### **What are the Protective Capacities?**

The definition says that the protective capacities are contained in the behavioral, cognitive and emotional functioning of the parent. These are the general areas you need to assess to determine if a parent is protective. Limitations and gaps in any of these areas mean CPS has to substitute for what the parent cannot do if threats to safety exist.

#### **Cognitive Protective Capacity**

This refers to specific intellectual, knowledge, understanding and perceptions that contribute to protective vigilance. Here are some examples of cognitive characteristics:

- Reality oriented
- Accurate perception of a child
- Recognition of a child's needs
- Ability to accurately process and interpret various stimuli
- Understanding protective role
- Intellectually able
- Understands and recognizes threats

## **Emotional Protective Capacity**

This refers to specific feelings, attitudes and identification with the child and motivation that result in parenting and protective vigilance. Here are some examples of emotional characteristics:

- Emotional bond with the child
- Positive attachment with the child
- Love, sensitivity and empathy for the child
- Resiliency
- Stability
- Effectively meets own emotional needs
- Emotional control

## **Behavioral Protective Capacity**

This refers to specific action, activity and performance that is consistent with and results in parenting and protective vigilance. Here are some examples of behavioral characteristics:

- Physical capacity and energy
- Ability to set aside own needs
- Adaptive
- Assertive and responsive
- Takes action
- Impulse control
- History of being protective

## **Assessing Protective Capacities**

Because CPS must rely on the existence of protective capacities to support a parent remaining responsible for a child's safety, it is critical that you build as much confidence as you can from your assessment of the protective capacities. The parent's statement about their capability or intent will not do as the basis for establishing the presence of sufficient protective capacity.

How do you assess protective capacity in ways that build your confidence?

First, here are some things to keep in mind:

- The judgment about whether a parent can and will protect his or her child occurs during a crisis – a highly emotionally charged time fueled by the revelation or denial that his or her child is not safe!

That means that the parent is, or reasonably would be, caught up in an emotional state that can include anger, shock, denial, confusion, dismay and distrust. Would you agree that when a person is operating primarily from emotions that he or she is more likely to be self-revealing? So, pay attention to information coming from parents that may best reflect indications of their protective capacity. It could be indicative of their natural reflex and instinct.

- The non-offending/non-threatening parent is the most important source of information about his or her protective capacities.

We've already emphasized that it is bad practice to accept a parent's statement about protective capacity and intention to protect. Therefore, you have to look carefully beyond what a parent says and assess what the parents intentionally or unintentionally reveal about themselves

specifically related to thinking, feeling and behaving that are relevant to protectiveness.

- A history of being protective is a significant indicator.

While every safety and protection situation must be examined in its current state, what a parent has done and how a parent has behaved in the past exists as a record of merit concerning what he or she is able and willing to do. But you should keep in mind that something within the current situation could even alter a protective parent's standard way of acting.

- Allies.

Test out with whom the non threatening parent is allied. If alliance is unclear, confused, conflicted, competitive, it may put the parent in a bind that overwhelms his or her capacity to protect.

- Righteous indignation.

The spirit and ire that a parent possesses concerning the family situation, the threat to safety, the threatening person and the vulnerability of the child are important indicators of protectiveness. But, you must beware of "the heat of the moment" dynamic where a parent displays righteous indignation at the onset and then mellows in the hours and days that follow.

- Plans that are likely to work.

When assessing for protective capacities, check out the parent's plan to protect the child. A reasonable, do-able and likely to work plan (one that makes sense) is 1) a good sign of protective capacity and 2) increases

confidence about a parent maintaining responsibility for providing protection.

- Others can testify to a parent's protective capacity.

The non offending parent is the main source of information for reaching a conclusion about protective capacity. Others who know the parent can confirm what you learn about the parent yourself; can provide historical information indicative of protectiveness; can elaborate on the nature of the relationship the parent has with the threatening person; and can provide an opinion about the parent's plan to protect. Of course, the challenge you face when assessing based on what others report is accurately judging their reliability and veracity.

Second, assessing for protective capacity is accomplished through focused, rigorous interviewing and information collecting. Ask, probe and observe. Look for consistency or contradiction. Be careful about over or under estimating what a parent and others may say. Attempt to establish *proof* of protective capacities. Assess for absolutes in so far as you can establish them.

## **Sylvia**

What are Sylvia's protective capacities? In this ten minute interview, Wayne explores Sylvia's thinking, feeling and behavior related to protecting her 18 month-old daughter from Sylvia's boyfriend Justin. The full assessment of Sylvia's protective capacity requires Wayne to speak with others in Sylvia's life along with evaluating Sylvia's parenting history specifically related to protectiveness. However, this short interview provides a basis for forming a pretty profound picture of Sylvia's protective capacity.

After you've watched the video, take some time to consider the assessment questions provided below.



You will need Windows Media Player v7 or higher to view the following video clips. The clip takes several minutes to download.

[56k Modem Version](#)

[Broadband Cable/DSL Version](#)

### **Assessing Sylvia's Protective Capacities**

This assessment exercise uses the protective capacity examples identified earlier. Keep in mind that this does not represent an exhaustive list of what constitutes protective capacities. Considering what you have learned and can judge from the interview with Sylvia, complete the assessment and indicate a conclusion. This assessment is a learning method, not a practice or decision making instrument.

## **Sylvia's Cognitive Protective Capacity**

### **Sylvia is reality oriented.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Inaccurate</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia has an accurate perception of Shelley.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Inaccurate</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia recognizes Shelley's needs (in particular for protection).**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Inaccurate</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia accurately processes and interprets the threat to Shelley and the need for protection.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Inaccurate</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia understands her protective role.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia is intellectually able to fulfill her protective role and responsibility.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Is Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia understands and recognizes threats to Shelley.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5



## **Sylvia's Emotional Protective Capacity**

### **Sylvia is emotionally bonded with Shelley.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Is Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Absolutely</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia has a positive attachment with child.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Absolutely</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia possesses love, sensitivity and empathy for Shelley.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Absolutely</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia is resilient.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Is Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia is emotionally stable.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Is Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia meets her own emotional needs effectively.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

### **Sylvia possesses emotional control.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Always</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

## **Sylvia's Behavioral Protective Capacity**

**Sylvia is physically able and has sufficient energy to be protective.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Absolutely</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

**Sylvia sets aside her own needs.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

**Sylvia adapts.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

**Sylvia is assertive and responsive.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Is Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

**Sylvia takes action.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

**Sylvia controls her impulses.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

**Sylvia has a history of being protective.**

<u>Unknown</u>	<u>Does Not</u>	<u>Limited</u>	<u>Somewhat</u>	<u>Generally</u>	<u>Clearly</u>
0	1	2	3	4	5

## Conclusion

Beyond what you've concluded through your assessment, you can reach a judgment about Sylvia's protective capacity by summarizing how you've assessed each of the protective capacity examples provided. Add the ratings you've identified. Divide them by 21. This gives you a sort of composite score across a 6 point scale. Of course, this is not scientific, nor does it account for the relative weight and influence of any one of the examples about Sylvia. However, we can feel okay about the summary score being indicative. Certainly, it impresses us all to realize that given the high stakes – child safety, confidence must be based on a high degree of certainty.

- 4.1 – 5.0 Sylvia demonstrates obvious protective capacities sufficient to provide protection for her daughter. High reliance on Sylvia.
- 3.1 – 4.0 Sylvia demonstrates protective capacities that with support are sufficient to protect her daughter. Guarded reliance on Sylvia.
- 2.1 – 3.0 Sylvia demonstrates varying protective capacities which will require both support and active involvement from others to assure protection of her daughter. Minimal reliance on Sylvia.
- 1.0 – 2.0 Sylvia's lack of protective capacity requires others to provide protection for Sylvia's daughter in-home, out-of-home or a combination of the two. No reliance on Sylvia.
- 0.0 – 0.9 Insufficient information exists or has been collected to make a judgment about Sylvia's protective capacity. While continued information collection occurs to ascertain Sylvia's protective capacity, others must provide protection for Sylvia's daughter. No reliance on Sylvia.