

The Approach to Gathering Information For Safety Decision Making

Part 2

Introduction

This article continues our series on what contributes to effective information gathering during the initial assessment which supports effective safety decision making. In September, we began this two-part series that provides step-by-step guidance about collecting information. Here we continue that effort and now offer things you might actually say or inquire about in the interviewing order in which information collection is likely to be the most productive.

All of us know that once you launch an initial assessment things don't always go smoothly or easily. Gathering sufficient information can occur by the conclusion of the initial family contact, but more often it does not. People are not accessible; family member reactions can be resistant or evasive; others with information are not available; information you collect may be conflicted, contradictory or insufficient, thus requiring additional inquiry. Other interferences occur all too often. While we recognize those common information collection challenges, we are writing this month's article with the idea that you proceed with information collection at initial contact with a particular order and objectives in mind, and you continue to pursue that order and objectives as you conduct the initial assessment.

So, as we begin with these practice suggestions, think of them as applying to the initial assessment at large rather than having to occur within any particular time elapse.

If you've read the September article, you know that we suggest a particular order for interviewing:

- Introduce the Initial Assessment to the Parents.
(Whether this is the first step depends on what has been reported and the location and condition of the child.)
- Interview the Identified Child.
- Interview Siblings in the Household (and other children).
- Interview the Non Maltreating Parent.
- Interview the Alleged Maltreating Parent.
- Conduct a Closing Interview with the Parents.

A note of explanation is in order in terms of the obvious orientation within this article to consider information related to maltreatment. Our explanation comes given that all our articles are focused on child safety. We see reported maltreatment and events associated with maltreatment as sort of the "window" for seeing into the family and for assessing child safety. Certainly the maltreatment alone is significant to explore and understand. However, the maltreatment, as we see it, is symptomatic of larger things going on in the family. And, we'd say maltreatment is either symptomatic of or contributing to present and impending danger. For those reasons, we encourage you to gather information about maltreatment and to use

the topic of maltreatment in order to (a) understand broader areas of individual and family functioning and (b) lead you into fully assessing threats to child safety.

Information Collection Protocol

Introduction with the Parents

1. Effective information collection depends directly upon how you approach parents; how you seek to explain your intent and purpose; how you involve them in the information collection process. A conscious use of yourself from the beginning to the end of the initial assessment is crucial to both the quantity and quality of information you are able to collect. Remember to be:
 - a. Genuine
 - b. Concrete
 - c. Respectful
 - d. Immediate (starting where the client is)
 - e. Empathetic
 - f. Open and objective
2. You must complete introductions which include who you are, what your agency is about, your purposes, and the essence of the report. You emphasize your intent to help and understand.
3. It is critical that, during the introduction, you present yourself in a calm, flexible and spontaneous manner. Your first priority

is to accommodate and address the parents' responses.

- a. Remain "where the parent is" in terms of concerns, emotions and reactions.
 - b. Stay in the "here and now" with the parent(s)—how they are feeling, reacting, thinking.
 - c. Identify with the parent(s)' feelings and concerns. Accept emotion. Let them ventilate.
 - d. Observe and register parent(s)' responses:
 - (1) Emotional responses and reactions
 - (2) Attempts to defend themselves
 - (3) Denial and disclosure
 - (4) Expressed explanations, rationale and justification
 - (5) Reality perception
 - (6) Reasoning
 - (7) Communication clarity and cohesiveness
4. You must notify parents of their rights at the commencement of the initial assessment. At the beginning of the initial assessment and at your introduction when questions of rights and participation arise, you can provide the parent with the following information concerning his/her basic rights:
- a. Parents have a right to know what the content of the CPS report entails but not the identity of the reporter.

- b. Prior to the commencement of any legal proceeding, the parents' interaction is voluntary.
- c. The parent cannot be compelled to appear at any conferences, produce documents, visit any place or otherwise reveal any information.
- d. If the Department initiates a legal proceeding, the parent has a right to an attorney, to a hearing and to present witnesses for his/her case.
- e. If the parent cannot afford an attorney, a court appointed attorney will be provided.
- f. Parents have all their civil rights as guaranteed under the US Constitution.

When discussing rights, it is useful to use regular language rather than legal terms. The important issue as related to implementing this protocol is that you demonstrate full respect for the parent's dignity and rights.

- 5. When covering the report, probe into the parent(s)' perception about the reason for the report.
 - a. "Why do you suppose someone reported your family? How do you feel about it?"
 - b. While avoiding reporter identity, do not avoid discussing the fact and reality that the family was reported.

6. During the introduction, allow the parent(s) to talk about the reported maltreatment, related events or issues associated with safety, but also plan to come back to these later.
 - a. To the extent that you are nondirective about the maltreatment or allegations during the introduction, you are more likely to avoid parent(s) building defenses and arguments immediately which will have to be overcome to proceed.
 - b. In order to remain in the "here and now," it will be important to allow the parent(s) to talk out their feelings and concerns about the allegations and to give their explanations. However, at a reasonable time, you should be prepared to move the interaction to broader concerns. Take the initiative away from them at the appropriate time.

Example:

"I know you are very concerned about what has been reported about you. And we need to talk about it in more detail so you can share with me what you want. But for now, let's move on to you helping me understand and get to know your family...."

7. During the introduction, you should begin assessing the immediate situation for the present danger which could suggest

a timely response by you to protect yourself, seek help and/or protect a child.

- a. Present danger indicates the need to take immediate action (e.g., bizarre behavior, weapons, threatening individuals in the home, etc.). When these highly charged circumstances exist which threaten your welfare, the child's safety, or prevent you from proceeding under reasonable circumstances, exit immediately and take action to manage the situation (e.g., seek support and assistance). Remember, when a child is in present danger, a protective action must be established the same day.
- b. Some family situations or parent behavior may not lead you to take any immediate action (parent intoxicated, family isolated, etc.). In such instances, you may suspect that present danger may exist, seek to understand its operation better during the course of the interviews and make another judgment before completion of the interviews about the need to take some protective action. You may wish to check out the archives. See the September 2003 article concerned with taking protective action.
- c. At any time you determine that a child is in present danger, you must begin the process of creating a

protective action. If possible, this should involve parents in considering what options are available (which do not rely on them personally). It may be necessary (and in some instances likely will be) to suspend the interviewing protocol process and begin taking action to establish a means for controlling the present danger.

8. The introduction is concluded by soliciting assistance from the parent in understanding the family.
 - a. Ask the parent to assist you in completing the interviews. Parent(s) can arrange for interviews with the family members and can select a private place for the interviews.
 - b. Tell parent(s) that you expect them to take the responsibility to participate by increasing your understanding.
 - c. Seek the parent(s)' perception about all matters. Consider and acknowledge their cognitive reasoning and feeling responses which influence your understanding.
9. Your work is a professional endeavor based on professional methods and practices. Share with them that you routinely

proceed toward understanding what is occurring through the application of a particular approach. Explain how you wish to proceed. Ask them to assist you by arranging for a private place to conduct interviews. Reassure them about your openness and your intent to review the situation at the conclusion of the interviews. As we've acknowledged, this process could occur during the first encounter with the family, but normally we know that it occurs over the life of the initial assessment.

Interview with the Identified Child

1. Your initial introduction to the child should be clear. Tell the child who you are and what you are doing here. How you speak with the child will vary depending upon how the agency became aware of this child. It is critical that you do not frighten the child. Additionally, you must not avoid the reason for your being involved with the family.
2. Once the introductions have been completed, time should be spent in getting to know the child and giving him a chance to know you. This should be purposeful. When relaxing a child, do not speak to him about unimportant matters. Such a misuse may limit time as well as create anxiety for the child. Initial questions can focus on the family.
3. All interactions with the child, as well as questioning, should be followed up with comments, thoughts and other questions

which are indicated by the child's response. It is also critical to ask questions appropriate to the child's age, developmental ability, and comfort level.

4. Your inquiries about the child and family in general should include consideration, even probing, into areas related to child safety such as:

- The comfort of the child with others
- Fears and anxieties the child experiences
- The child's vulnerability and capacity to self-protect
- Explanations the child gives for areas of family life and parenting behavior that may be associated with threats to safety and protectiveness

5. Here are some sample questions which can be used to initiate the interview:

Family

- a. "Who is in your family?" (Family Functioning)
- b. "Who lives at home with you?" (Family Functioning)
- c. "What kinds of things does your family do together?" (Family Functioning)
- d. "How do you get along with your brothers/sisters? What kinds of things do you do with them?" (Family Functioning)

- e. “Tell me about your grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.”
(Support)

Child

- a. “What kinds of things do you do in school? Any areas where you have problems? Are there times when things are easy?”
(Child Functioning)
- b. “Who do you hang out with at school? Who are your friends?” (Child Functioning)
- c. “Do you belong to any clubs, or participate in any organized activities?” (Child Functioning)
- d. “When are you most comfortable? When are you afraid? Who do you go to for help or safety?” (Safety and Vulnerability)

Parent

- a. “How do you get along with your mom/dad?” (Adult Functioning/ Parenting)
- b. “What happens when things aren't going well? How do your parents react? (Adult Functioning) What kind of things do they do?” (Parenting)
- c. “What about your brothers/sisters, how do they deal with them?” (Adult Functioning/ Parenting)
- d. “Do your parents belong to any organizations, have any friends, etc.?” (Support)

- e. “How do your parents take care of you? How do they punish you? For what?”
 - f. “Are there home situations or things that your parents do that scare you or worry you?”
6. By approaching the child initially without focusing on the possible maltreatment, you create an environment in which the child may feel freer in talking with you about difficult subjects. At the same time, you gather information which will help you assess and analyze the current situation and make decisions. The above identified questions can be asked during the initial contact with the identified child or covered in various ways during the initial contact. Remember, depending upon how things occur, if you have not gathered that type of information early, remember to seek it as the interview continues.
7. At a point in time when the context suggests, you want to seek information about the possible maltreatment. When seeking information about the nature of the maltreatment and the actual maltreatment, you must pay attention to anxiety and other emotions, and respond accordingly.

8. Here are some sample questions which can be used to explore the alleged maltreatment:

Maltreatment

- a. “As I mentioned to you earlier, I have spoken to _____, and he/she told me about what you told her. I need you to tell me about it. Can you tell me about what happened?” (Maltreatment)
 - b. “What else happened?” (Maltreatment) (As a rule you will often ask this type of question to fully explore with the child the extent of the maltreatment.)
 - c. “Has anything like this happened to your other brothers/sisters?” (Maltreatment)
 - d. “What did your other parent (if there is a non-alleged maltreating parent) say, do, etc.?” (Nature)
 - e. “When this occurred, how did it happen? What was happening around the home (situation) when this occurred? What else was occurring?” (Nature)
9. As you proceed toward the end of this interview or information collection in general, you should always consider how the child is feeling (Child Functioning), any fear he is experiencing (Child Functioning), determine where he is going after the interview (Child Functioning), assess his level of vulnerability (Child Functioning), and inform him of your next steps and when/how you will get back to him.

10. The information here reflects only general guidance. It should be recognized that sufficient information collecting will require that you probe much deeper and inquire about subject matter more broadly. Your understanding of child functioning, the maltreatment and parent functioning increases as you dig deeper with the child. Normally speaking, you might expect to interview a child up to a half hour depending on his responsiveness and verbal accessibility. More than half an hour is likely too taxing for most children. Younger children may be even less tolerant. It may be necessary for you to shorten the length of a single interview with the intention of returning to continue the interview later.

Interviews with Siblings

1. Following the information gathering during the interview with the identified child, you interview that child's siblings. The purposes of these interviews are:
 - a. To determine what has been happening with those children (Maltreatment). Information from the identified child will help you decide about the likelihood of those children having experienced some maltreatment.
 - b. To gather further information about the family's functioning (Family Functioning).
 - c. To gather further information about the parents' actions, behaviors, and emotions (Adult Functioning/Parenting).

- d. To gather information about the siblings, their behaviors, feelings, and emotions (Child Functioning).
 - e. To assess the siblings' level of vulnerability (Child Functioning).
 - f. To seek information which you were unable to gather from the identified child.
2. The process of interviewing siblings is similar to that of the identified child. It should be emphasized that the need for these interviews is established by the results of the interview with the identified child.
3. Your approach should focus on providing a comfortable atmosphere for the child and paying attention to the feelings and emotions of the child (Child Functioning).
4. Although individual situations will determine the need to interview siblings, as a rule you should conduct these interviews at this point. Decisions not to conduct these interviews may be based upon the need for emergency action (regarding the identified child), the accessibility of the siblings, and the need to become involved with the parent(s). Any determination not to interview the siblings should be documented.
5. The sample questions provided to you for interviewing the identified child can be used during sibling interviews.

Interview with Non-alleged Maltreating Parent

[Note: This protocol is designed for a two-parent/caregiver family. Admittedly many, if not most, cases involve single parent households or families that include adults whose role in the family is not well defined in relation to the children. When employing this protocol, it becomes necessary for the CPS worker to make adjustments to how guidance applies to a particular case. That includes how to proceed in interviewing, inquiries, skills and use of self.]

1. The interview with the non-alleged maltreating parent is critical for a variety of reasons:
 - a. It is this parent who may be required to provide protection for the child(ren).
 - b. The non-alleged maltreating parent will often be the first parent who is informed of what intervention may mean to the family.
 - c. An assessment of this parent's behavior/feelings must be made to determine the safety of the child(ren). In particular, safety assessment requires you to judge the protective capacity of a non maltreating parent, so this interview is crucial to safety intervention decision making.
 - d. Your interaction with the non-alleged maltreating parent will often determine your approach to the alleged maltreating parent.

2. Interviewing skills and techniques with the non-alleged maltreating parent will focus on extensive use of feeling and support techniques. Additionally, your comfort in using reality-orienting techniques is essential.
3. The key to the interview with the non-alleged maltreating parent is to involve this person in a joint effort with you. Often, mistakes are made by asking the non-alleged maltreating parent to make a choice between the child and the alleged maltreating parent. This approach will not work because it requires a person in crisis to decide something which he or she cannot or will not. The preferred approach is to ask that parent to join with you in making the environment safe for the child, as well as the alleged maltreating parent.
4. The circumstances of the interview with the non-alleged maltreating parent will determine the process of the interview and the order of questions/responses. It is usual to talk to the parent about the reason you are involved. You must be prepared to deal with hostility, anger, and varying levels of denial. This should not be assumed to indicate by itself that the parent cannot assist the child.
5. It should be noted that in situations of neglect of children, the distinction between a non-alleged maltreating parent and an alleged maltreating parent is not as clear as it is with physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional maltreatment. You need to

explore the family functioning with each parent and ensure the issues related to protection are examined.

6. Here are some sample questions which you may use in this interview:

Child

- a. “Tell me about your child. How do you feel about your child? What do you think about your child? His capacity? His actions/behaviors?” (Parenting)
- b. “How does your child behave/act?” (Child Functioning)
- c. “Does your child have friends?” (Child Functioning)
- d. “Does the child have any current or past health-related problems that affect him today?” (Child Functioning)

Parent’s General Adult Functioning & Parenting

- a. “Tell me about yourself—about your feelings, and about what is happening. How do you think things have been between you and your spouse (partner)?” Explore with the non-alleged maltreating parent the feelings that the worker believes are being exhibited and follow up on those. (Adult Functioning, History, Family Functioning)

- b. “What is the most special thing about parenting your child? The most difficult thing? Child behavior that is challenging? Approaches to managing the child? To discipline?” (Parenting)
- c. Explore with the non-alleged maltreating parent how he believes his child is doing, what he is experiencing. Examine issues relating to bonding, attachment, concern, empathy, worry, anxiety, etc. (Adult Functioning, Parenting)
- d. “Tell me about the family that you grew up in. What types of things did you do? What are some of your fond memories? Your sad or hurtful memories?” (History)
- e. “What do you do with your friends? Who are your friends? What do you share with your friends?” (Support)
- f. “Do you belong to any groups, organizations, religious affiliations, etc.?” (Support)

Family

- a. “What types of things are you responsible for in the home, and with the family: chores, routine, structure, meals, etc.?” (Family Functioning, Parenting)
- b. “How do the family members show they care about each other? What affection is demonstrated?” (Family Functioning)
- c. “Who gives orders in the home? Who is in charge?” (Family Functioning)

- d. “What happens when the orders given are not followed?”
(Family Functioning)
- e. “Talk about the marriage. What are the things that make it good? Things you wish you could change? Communication difficulties? Sexual relationship?” (Family Functioning)
- f. “Tell me about your folks. What about extended family members? What about neighbors, are they helpful to you and you to them?” (Support)
- g. Influences regarding the demographics, extended family, and family functioning are gathered through a variety of observations during the initial interview and subsequent interviews.

Maltreatment

- a. What are the parent's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about the maltreatment? Do you believe the child's version of events and circumstances? (Nature)
- b. Do you have any information which suggests the non-alleged maltreating parent has been involved in maltreatment? If yes, explore this with the parent in a direct, yet non-adversarial manner. (Maltreatment)
- c. What is occurring that threatens the child's safety? How do you feel about the child's situation? Any threats the child is experiencing? Fear or suffering the child may be experiencing? (Maltreatment, Child Functioning, Nature)

- d. Explore with the non-alleged maltreating parent the alternatives to provide protection to the family. Can this person, with your assistance, do such? (Nature)

Reaction to Intervention

- a. You should assess the non-alleged maltreating parent's reaction to intervention at the end of the initial interview, as well as during subsequent interviews. The focus here is on the level of openness this parent has to the agency being involved with the family.
- b. Explore with the parent the meaning of intervention. Have they had assistance before? What was the reaction and response to that assistance?
- c. You should explore your own strengths and limitations in working with the family, including the agency's capacity to respond, and the availability and accessibility of community resources.

Interview with the Alleged Maltreating Parent

[Note: If the alleged maltreating person is not the child's biological parent, it is important at the beginning of the interview to establish the person's relationship in the family and with the child in particular. If the person does include caregiving as a responsibility, it is important to determine the nature, expectations and limits of that involvement.]

1. The interview with the alleged maltreating parent may cause you a variety of concerns, such as:
 - a. What will the person's reaction be?
 - b. Will the level of anger, hostility, or denial make it impossible to interview the parent?
 - c. What should the alleged maltreating parent be told?
 - d. How should I interact with the parent?

2. These concerns may be influenced by assumptions about the person based upon the report or what you have learned through previous interviews. You must avoid interviewing the alleged maltreating parent in an aggressive manner. This usually results in an adversarial relationship which is not necessary. Do not focus on getting the alleged maltreating parent to admit what he has done.

3. The purposes of this interview are to:
 - a. Share with the parent what has occurred related to the other interviews.
 - b. Explore with the parent the family situation from a perspective of what is happening in the family which may be threatening to the child's safety.
 - c. Assess the parent's ability to become involved with the agency, focusing on controlling for the child's safety.

- d. Identify family conditions which may require further study (such as substance use, domestic violence, emotional disturbance).
4. In order to effectively intervene with the alleged maltreating parent, you must be aware of, and in control of, your feelings. Critical to this interaction is seeking information from the parent rather than "proving" guilt. To the extent that you can exercise a nonjudgmental attitude, the results from the initial interview and subsequent interviews with the alleged maltreating parent will provide essential information in order to make necessary decisions at initial assessment. You should seek information from all aspects of the family. It is critical to use observational skills as well as verbal skills and techniques to properly assess all aspects of the parent's functioning, especially his behavior and feelings.
5. The order of the interviewing process will be determined by the actual situation. However, you can expect the parent will want to know the reason for your presence (for the initial assessment). While you should let the parent know in general the reason for your presence, it is not recommended that all the information concerning the maltreatment and other reported concerns be presented initially. To do so would cause the interaction to slide into a series of accusations and denials.

Focusing on feelings and joining the client's resistance regarding his parenting is a more useful and effective approach with the alleged maltreating parent.

6. Here are some sample questions which may be used during this interview:

Child

- a. "Tell me about your child. How does your child respond to you? Is he easy-going? Difficult?" (Parenting)
- b. "What type of things do you expect your child to do around the house, with siblings, for you?" (Parenting)
- c. "What type of behaviors and emotions does your child show?" (Child Functioning)
- d. "Does your child have friends?" (Child Functioning)
- e. "Does your child have any health-related problems that affect him today?" (Child Functioning)
- f. "Does your child feel safe? How do you contribute to that?"

Parent

- a. "Tell me about yourself, about your feelings and about what is happening. How do you think things have been between you and your spouse (partner)?" Explore with the alleged maltreating parent the feelings that the worker believes are

- being exhibited and follow up on those. (Adult Functioning, History, Family Functioning)
- b. “What is the most special thing about parenting your child(ren)? The most difficult thing?” (Parenting)
 - c. Explore with the alleged maltreating parent how he believes his child is doing, what he is experiencing. Examine issues related to bonding, attachment, concern, empathy, worry, anxiety, etc. (Adult Functioning, Parenting)
 - d. “Tell me about the family that you grew up in. What types of things did you do? What are some of your fond memories? Your sad or hurtful memories?” (History)
 - e. “What do you do with your friends? Who are your friends? What do you share with your friends?” (Support)
 - f. “Do you belong to any groups, organizations, religious affiliations, etc.?” (Support)

Family

- a. “How do the family members show they care about each other? What affection is demonstrated?” (Family Functioning)
- b. “Who gives orders in the home? Who is in charge?” (Family Functioning)
- c. “What happens when the orders given are not followed?” (Family Functioning)

- d. “Talk about the marriage. What are the things that make it good? Things you wish you could change? Communication difficulties? Sexual relationship?” (Family Functioning)
- e. “Tell me about your folks. What about extended family members? What about neighbors, are they helpful to you and you to them?” (Support)
- f. “Describe how roles are developed, assumed, and carried out in the home. Who does what? How is it decided who will do what in the home?” (Family Functioning)
- g. Influences regarding demographics, extended family, and family functioning are gathered through a variety of observations during the initial interview and subsequent interviews.

Maltreatment

- a. When you begin to talk to the parent about the maltreatment, minimal information should be given. It is critical that you not engage in a battle of wills. Refocus the parent to his or her own feelings.
- b. “What do you want to do about this? How can we make sure nothing like this happens again?” (Maltreatment)
- c. “Tell me what has been going on with you. Have you been under stress? What from? Drinking? Marital problems? Job-related problems?” (Nature)
- d. At an appropriate time, you should always share your belief about the maltreatment with the alleged maltreating

parent. There is no need to "beat" this to death. This represents your belief based on what you know to the point of interviewing the alleged maltreater. It is your conclusion based on other interviews and other sources of information.

Reaction to Intervention

- a. You should assess the alleged maltreating parent's reaction to intervention at the end of the initial interview, as well as during subsequent interviews. The focus here is the level of openness this parent has to the agency being involved with the family. You should not expect the parent to embrace the agency in making this assessment.
- b. Explore the issue of what intervention means to the parent. Have they had assistance before? What was the reaction and response to that assistance?
- c. Explore your strengths and limitations in working with the family, including the agency's capacity to respond, and the availability and accessibility of community resources.

Closure with Parents/Family

1. Following the completion of the interviews and/or the initial assessment, you should reconvene the parents or family as appropriate. Share with them a summary of your findings and impressions. The closure may occur after the initial contact, but that is unlikely. So, here, closure refers to the time when all

interviews are done with the family. You might think of this as the last contact you have with the family prior to completing and documenting the initial assessment.

(We recognize, once again, that the process of collecting information during initial assessment can be rocky. The process sometimes includes interruptions where you must take actions to protect a child, participate in court hearings, and so forth. We mention this because given all that can happen as an initial assessment proceeds, often, the summary we suggest here could be anti-climatic. In other words, enough along the way may have happened so that people are well informed and a summary is simply not necessary.)

2. Seek individual responses concerning perceptions and feelings. Take care not to reopen the whole process.
3. As a result of the information collecting that has occurred during all the interviews and at the point of closing, it is critical that you have a full understanding of any maltreatment and the circumstances surrounding the maltreatment.
 - a. Depending on your understanding of the family's response to the allegation, you may choose to summarize your findings which you are considering in respect to the information alleged at intake.

- b. You must be certain that your understanding of the maltreatment gained from your interviews includes: sufficient information, precise explanations, parent(s)' rationale, parent(s)' emotional response concerned with the discussion on maltreatment, and the quality of the parent(s)' response.

- c. At the closure of particular information collection efforts or interviews, avoid providing the parent(s) your conclusions or your beliefs about the allegations. Reassure them that you have been seeking to understand the family which will require time to think about the information. Providing fuller disclosure about your conclusions and decisions occurs only after the initial assessment concludes—which also concludes assessment of impending danger.

This ends part 2 of this series offering an information collection protocol. Next month we conclude our discussion on information collection as we examine an interviewing-information collection concept called D.I.G. or diligent information gathering.