

The Approach to Gathering Information for Safety Decision Making

Part 1

Introduction

This article continues our series on what contributes to effective information gathering during the initial assessment which supports effective safety decision making. Last month we emphasized that the most profound influence in effective information collection is *you*. We considered values and personal characteristics that enhance your ability to involve others in a productive information collection process. This month we deliberate on the approach you use. How do you proceed when collecting information?

Here we will provide a very detailed, blow-by-blow account of how to approach information collection. Certainly there will be times when your best intention to proceed in this or another fashion is disrupted by circumstances and events. The idea here, though, is for you to have an approach that provides you with organization, clarity about what you are doing, and a sense of control over how to proceed.

Here is the spirit of this approach. Anyone that has been in child welfare for a while knows that sometimes the conditions that prevail at initial assessment are often not conducive to effective information collection. Often an initial assessment begins at least minimally as adversarial; it does not have to remain that way depending on your approach. This does not mean that the activity is easy or that you will not encounter hostility, resistance, or anger. However, you must be able to create an atmosphere in which family members can talk. This atmosphere should be neither interrogational nor punitive. This approach can assist you in creating that atmosphere. What you do when gathering information as part of the initial assessment should be a uniform, systematic, and structured approach to all family situations where a child may not be safe. Applying what we

suggest here can create situations in which you are in control of the process. That will support you in gathering sufficient information to make decisions, determine with a higher degree of accuracy what is occurring, and insure that all family members are seen and involved.

General Issues

To effectively collect safety-related information during initial assessment, you must consider a number of crucial issues.

Elevate the parent(s).

Your most successful interviews will be associated with a parent's sense of self-respect which has occurred during the process. You can demonstrate your respect for parents and reinforce their own sense of self-respect by communicating and behaving in a manner that elevates them. *Elevating the parent* with respect to information collection refers to what you do to indicate to parents that they are the authoritative source of information about their family. You elevate the parent as you indicate to her that you rely upon her to help you understand the family and to complete your responsibilities. Elevating the parent can be enhanced through a number of actions:

- You should identify with their feelings and the situation from their point of view. What do things mean to them?
- Give parents information. To do so empowers them.
- Use an approach that reduces your power and authority.
- Seek assistance from the parent(s) in completing the initial assessment.

When you focus your attention on someone, you are indicating to them that he or she is important, worthy of your time and your interest. That is consistent with the concept of elevating the parent. How effective are you at focusing yourself, your attention, your concentration, and your observations? Skill in focusing yourself demands that you are able to "spotlight" on the parent in penetrating ways while you appear relaxed, calm, and genuine. You must be able to focus yourself as you spontaneously and flexibly respond to the parent in appropriate and purposeful ways.

Your Self-Control

This relates to two areas of self-control: (1) controlling your emotions such as whether you are feeling intimidated, are over-identifying with a parent, or maybe being insensitive and (2) controlling your focus or concentration so that you are really tuned into the parent. Controlling yourself includes self-awareness and management of your values and intentions. You must remain open as you proceed to understand the situation.

You must be relaxed, un-offended, not defending yourself, your agency or your purpose for being in the home. Self-control should also be thought of as including depersonalizing verbal assault directed at you. It may be difficult to balance being sensitive/gentle with being firm, but it is critical that you remain resolute about the importance of what you are doing and the need to have the client involved.

Controlling yourself demands that you recognize parents in positive, open terms. Avoid stereotypes.

How you present yourself to the parent is a part of controlling yourself. This refers to the "state of being" which you represent. Among the most personal areas that we have to control is the feeling of not being liked or appreciated which often occurs during the initial assessment.

An Organized Approach

There are hurdles that you will have to be prepared for to assure effectiveness during initial assessment information collection. So you'll need to be well organized and anticipate how you will proceed. Here are some challenges that your approach must take into account:

- How you introduce the referral.
- How you justify yourself.
- How you manage parent anger over the report or CPS interference.
- How you will interview all necessary persons.
- How you will manage and balance information needs against relating to parents/children.
- How you will manage time:
 - number of interviews;
 - extensive information gathering;
 - your organizational skills;
 - your technical facility in content and skill; and
 - balancing time demands against the need to focus on the parent.

An organized approach means you must do some planning prior to contacting the family. You should begin by thoroughly reviewing the information which has been gathered at intake. You should pay special attention to information which was unknown at intake, but which may influence the threats to child safety. It is important to consider any previous knowledge about the family that may be available from files, records, and staff. You should anticipate whether information suggests that you may need to conduct one or more interviews. Additionally, thought should be given to where interviews should be conducted and when. Having sufficient time to complete all necessary interviews that form your approach should be considered prior to beginning the initial contacts. When you think about it, you actually begin your "focus" on the parent and other family members and on your purposes as you form your plan.

An organized approach means you interview family members in a specific order. This provides you with a method for gaining the broadest understanding of the family's situation. The order is dependent upon where the identified child is located at the time the initial assessment begins. When the child is in the home, the order is as follows:

- a. Introduction with parents.
- b. Interview with identified child.
- c. Interview with siblings.
- d. Interview with non-alleged maltreating parent.
- e. Interview with alleged maltreating parent.
- f. Closure with parents/family.

In situations where the child is not at home at the beginning of the initial assessment, the order begins with the identified child, wherever that child is, then proceeds as above without introduction with parents. It is our preference to always be mindful of parents' rights and how parents feel when their children are seen and interviewed without their permission. That is why it is so important to communicate with parents as soon as possible following starting information collection with a child.

Effective application of this approach on your part includes:

- a. Privacy should be provided to all family members.
- b. You should be prepared to spend a sufficient amount of time with the family members so that the individuals do not believe they are of little or no importance to the worker.
- c. You should prepare for the interviews in such a manner as to be able to discuss relevant issues while controlling emotional responses.

One of the major benefits of this organized approach is that it enables you to use information from one interview to assist in the next interview. While the approach suggested here emphasizes getting started with the initial contact, it must be remembered that the entire initial assessment process relates to all interviews, not only the initial contact.

This concludes Part 1 of this article. Next month we will consider in detail what you do as you proceed through this information collection approach. So, stay tuned.