

# When Children Are in Danger

## Introduction

This is our third article concerned with the challenge of identifying the occurrence of danger within a family which threatens a child's safety (see [March 2003](#) and [January 2006](#)). We visit this topic again because it is somewhat difficult to understand, yet it is so important if we are to correctly assess, evaluate, and comprehend when children are not safe. It really is crucial to know that safety assessment requires that we are able to determine children are unsafe whether safety threats are active and happening right in front of us or whether safety threats are not active, but truly do exist.

This is how we've written about these two types of occurrences. One way threats occur is as *present danger* which is consistent with a child being in danger the same day you show up. The other way threats occur is as *impending danger* which is consistent with a child who is not in danger the day you show up but who lives from day to day in a state of dormant danger to some extent which could become active at any time. Because the question of when children are in danger is the point from which all safety intervention precedes, we thought it would be useful to once again consider these two types of occurrences of safety threats: to amplify them as best we can and to provide some case examples to illustrate how they may be encountered by a worker conducting a safety assessment.

## Present Danger

First we will consider present danger. We've defined present danger as *an immediate, significant and clearly observable behavior or situation that is actively occurring and threatens a vulnerable child's safety.*

Remember it is always important to qualify the importance of a vulnerable child being involved as fundamental to safety assessment. A vulnerable child is one who is susceptible to the effects of danger and unable to protect himself from the danger.

The present danger definition is primarily concerned with a caregiver's behavior that is directly threatening or results in a child being subject to a threat and/or being unprotected from a threat. This could involve physical aggression, failure to protect a child from aggression or a threatening situation, or neglectful behavior which deprives a child of safeguards and/or life necessities.

Our reference to *situation* is concerned with the circumstances a vulnerable child is in which includes his location, his condition, his proximity to dangerous events, and social or physical conditions happening around a vulnerable child, affecting or potentially affecting the child.

*Actively occurring* means that present danger is in evidence (occurring) during the same day of your contact with the family. This means that the threatening behavior or situation is in the process of happening when you first observe what is going on in the family. Here are four examples of *actively occurring* during the same day:

- A child was seriously injured last night, brought to the hospital this morning, and there is no acceptable explanation for the injury as you begin your initial assessment.
- A child has been reported as seriously malnourished, and the father refuses you access to the child when you make your first contact with the family.
- An elementary school-age child has been left alone in her home unsupervised all last night, and it is unknown whether she will be supervised tonight.
- The mother of three small children is high, incoherent and physically disoriented when you show up for the initial contact.

These examples are familiar to CPS workers. But are they the norm in terms of kinds of referrals to which CPS responds? While there is likely some variation in the kinds of referrals that different jurisdictions receive, it has been our experience that generally present danger (like these examples) is not common when compared to all cases reported to CPS. For instance, if you were to respond to 10 reports of maltreatment, perhaps only 1 or 2 might involve present danger. Maybe even a smaller percentage of reports involve present danger.

What do you notice about these examples? Can you make a judgment about the immediate safety of the child involved with this very limited information? Is it obvious that the threat is related to caregiver behavior or the child's situation? With respect to an active threat, is each example overt which means evident, clear, may be even blatant? Can you see that what is occurring in each example is in the process of happening the same day? If your answer to these questions is "yes," then you are in touch with key features of the concept of present danger.

How much can you conclude about these examples? Are you able to draw judgments about the case or family in general from these examples? Can you conclude that these examples are true or representative of how caregivers and the families function at large? Can you determine from this information that this is the way the caregiver behavior or the child's situation is every day? Can you tell whether this behavior or situation is an aberration or is typical in this family? If your answer to these questions is "no," then you are in touch with an important difference between present danger and impending danger.

### **Impending Danger**

Now we turn to impending danger. We've defined impending danger as *threatening family conditions that are not obvious or active or occurring when you first show up but are out of control and likely to have a severe effect on a child at any time*. We've said that impending danger has four distinct features:

- Impending danger refers to threats to a child's safety that exist, are insidious, but are not necessarily immediate, obvious, or active at the onset of CPS intervention.
- The existence of impending danger must be discovered. Impending danger refers to threats that eventually are identified and understood upon more fully evaluating and understanding individual and family conditions and functioning. You've got to get to know the family.
- Impending danger refers to threats that reasonably will result in severe harm if safety intervention does not occur and is not sustained. The threat becoming active could happen at any time; the severe harm could be the result of the active threat at any time.
- Family situations and caregiver behaviors are qualified as impending danger when they are out of the family's control, likely to have a severe effect on a vulnerable child, are observable and specific, and are imminent (likely to occur at any time).

Above we stated that the nature of present danger is overt. The nature of impending danger is covert. It is concealed or hidden within general family functioning. It is not only not obvious at least at the first encounter, but it often is kept secret and underground on purpose, through denial, unrecognized by caregivers due to ignorance or simply as a result of how the family operates. The behaviors and conditions that result in impending danger may simply be symptomatic of the existing and/or long-standing life style of the family. This can result in caregivers not considering, recognizing or acknowledging that what is going on in their lives and the family is dangerous to their children.

Impending danger is an enigma—a mystery or puzzle that must be sorted out and understood through effective, careful, diligent interviewing and information collection involving caregivers, children, other family members, and others who are familiar with a family. Of course, here we refer to information collection that occurs as part of a diligent initial assessment or investigation. Whereas present danger is easy to detect, impending danger requires careful consideration of the

family in order to see patterns, occurrences, influences, frequencies of events, stresses and needs that shape and form caregiver behavior, the parent-child relationship, and family situations which result in danger to a child. This careful consideration also requires all attempts to seek out the truth and reality of what is occurring within a family. This includes (1) joining with caregivers, (2) engaging participation, (3) reconciling discrepancies, (4) confronting denial, (5) testing reality, (6) managing manipulation, (7) encouraging openness, (8) explaining consequences, and (9) seeking cooperation and acceptance. So, you can see that uncovering the existence of impending danger is no small challenge, and the abilities required in effective information collection are not menial.

Another way to understand impending danger is to think of it as a child living in a state of danger. What does this mean? A child who lives in a state of danger is not always in immediate danger but is always susceptible to danger. Threats to safety are not always active but can become active at any time or may become active because of specific, stimulating events, circumstances, or influences. Sometimes when impending danger exists, the child's daily existence is always subject to a threat of dangerous behavior, a dangerous event, or a dangerous situation and the resulting effects. Sometimes when impending danger exists as a dangerous behavior, a dangerous event, or a dangerous situation it is associated with a particular event such as pay day or particular timing such as Friday nights or a particular influence such as only when the caregiver consumes alcohol.

These various circumstances are what the initial assessment and safety assessment must determine. This is why it is so critical that a formal safety assessment occurs at the conclusion of the initial assessment which allows for a full evaluation of everything that is known about a family.

Is it really important to make this distinction about how danger is occurring when you are assessing for safety? Is it important to acknowledge the existence of present danger and impending danger? Yes, it is. There are several reasons why it

is important that you understand these two ways that danger may exist in a family.

- Present danger can be identified, yet no impending danger exists.
- Present danger can be identified, and impending danger exists so that the present danger is actually impending danger that has become active.
- Present danger may not be identified, but impending danger can exist.
- Present danger is vivid and obvious, yet may misrepresent to the worker what is occurring in a family related to safety at large. The absence of present danger may also misrepresent to the worker what is occurring when a worker is not cognizant of the concept of impending danger.
- Impending danger is not obvious, and its illusiveness can result in workers not pursuing information collection sufficient to reveal it. In many cases, impending danger when not looked for purposefully—when not ruled in or ruled out—will not be revealed through the natural course of worker-family interaction.

So you can see that the distinction about how danger is occurring when you are assessing for safety is actually crucial to effective safety assessment. Things in families are not the same every day. What is happening one day in a family may not be representative of what is happening most days in a family. Your introduction into a family at a certain time in no way guarantees that you will encounter the truth and reality of what that family is like generally. Not being aware of the existence of present danger and impending danger can result in serious mistakes related to how you proceed during initial assessment/investigation and how you decide.

There is an incorrect assumption about safety assessment in some places that can result in wrong judgments and responses. The incorrect assumption is that when a case is reported to CPS and a child is unsafe the danger will be evident during the initial encounters with the case. The corresponding assumption is that if danger is not identified during the initial encounters, then a general conclusion can be drawn that the child is safe. These incorrect assumptions appear to be

based on viewing danger as existing within families in only one dimension—what is immediately obvious and what we've described as present danger. When safety assessment operates according to this assumption, continuing safety assessment typically considers whether a child is in present danger too. So, because of the cryptic nature of impending danger, no concentration ever occurs or occurs sufficiently to know and understand the true and real occurrence of threats to child safety in a family.

### **Examples to Illustrate Present and Impending Danger**

In one of our previous articles on present and impending danger, we wrote of a case involving present danger. It was a real case that occurred in the Midwest. Here it is:

A mom was hanging laundry out in her back yard one day while her child played inside the house. The preschool child was autistic. The mom may or may not have had a device for keeping the doors secured to keep the child inside. However, the child made his way outside the house and wandered off despite the mom's normal watchful eye. The family lived in a rural area so the child made his way along the roadway and soon was meandering along a highway. A trucker noticed the child, picked him up, and delivered him to local law enforcement authorities. After some effort, law enforcement and CPS located the mother who had become frantic upon realizing that her child had wandered off. The whole event happened within a relatively brief period of time. This child was in present danger. The initial assessment/investigation of the home, the mother, the father, and the family revealed that the mother was an excellent, protective caregiver. It was confirmed that she was well prepared to care for that special-needs child and was diligent about the child's care and supervision. This was an unfortunate mistake and actually an aberration in terms of the child's care. There was no impending danger.

**A similar case came to our attention recently. Here it is:**

This toddler lived in an apartment complex in a city, and the child's home was near an interstate. It is not clear how on the day of the incident the child made his way to the freeway, but apparently in a matter of moments the child was walking in the lanes of traffic. Drivers of cars and trucks were suddenly faced with dodging the toddler. A

trucker blocked traffic with his truck while another motorist rescued the child from the traffic. The child was barefoot and clothed only in a diaper. Law enforcement was contacted, and the child was turned over to them. Law enforcement was able to communicate with the child sufficiently to determine where he lived. Upon arriving at the child's home, law enforcement and CPS found the mother asleep, two other preschool children unsupervised, and the house in complete disarray. All of the children were in present danger. The initial assessment/investigation discovered (1) a previous history with CPS, (2) a transitory life style, (3) financial and employment problems, (4) substance use, (5) indiscriminate and heavy reliance and dependence on others for child care and support, (6) limited cognitive and problem solving skills, (7) low empathy for the children or their needs, (8) some relationship conflicts and problems, and (9) limited resources such as transportation and finances. The mother was consumed with her own needs, minimized danger her children might be in, and began to blame her children for the CPS intervention. The children were in impending danger too.

These two real cases came to the awareness of the community in the same way—a small child wandering in traffic. Both children were in present danger. But both children were not in impending danger. The circumstances, limitations, strengths and functioning of each family subsequent to the present danger incident were drastically different. In the instance of the autistic child, present danger was an aberration. It was not representative of how the family functioned or how protective the caregiver was. With the other child, the problem of a lack of supervision that resulted in the child wandering onto the interstate was symptomatic of how the child's family functioned generally and was a result of a nonprotective caregiver.

Most cases referred to CPS do not involve present danger or, if the referral indicates present danger, by the time you encounter the family, present danger may not be evident. Here's a real case which illustrates the importance of not limiting safety assessment to present danger or the early encounters occurring during initial assessment/investigation:

An apartment manager called CPS about a tenant on a Monday. The referral identified a young mother of a six-month-old girl. The

apartment manager alleged that the young mother left her child home alone for several hours Saturday evening. The apartment manager said her information was second hand from another tenant. The story was that the young mother entertained friends for a couple of hours. The party got very loud, and the neighbor complained to the young mother. The neighbor saw the young mother leave with her friends and did not see her return. The neighbor said he heard the child cry off and on from midnight until around 4 am at which time he knocked on the young mother's door. The young mother answered the door. She was dressed as if she'd been out. She indicated to the neighbor that the infant was fine. CPS initiated an initial assessment/investigation. At the first encounter, the CPS worker found the home well kept, the young mother pleasant and responsive, the infant well cared for and responsive to the young mother. The child was not in present danger. The young mother denied having left the infant alone. She indicated that following the get together at her apartment she had accompanied her friends to their cars and then returned to her apartment. She said she was home the rest of the night. She admitted that the child cried throughout the night and stated the child had an ear infection which she confirmed at the pediatrician visit this same morning. The young mother expressed openness and acceptance to continue the initial assessment. A contact with the neighbor reconfirmed his story including him noting that he never heard her return which he said he would have had she done so. He said he did hear keys rattling in her door and the door opening and closing just before he went to see about the child at 4:00 a.m.

As the interviewing and information collection continued, it was determined that the young mother was married to a Marine who was stationed in Iraq. She had been living alone for four months in this city since he was dispatched overseas. She had no family in the city. She was 19 years old. She had been married for only a few months before the infant was born. She had dropped out of high school when she got married and later moved with her new husband to this city just prior to his departure to Iraq. She did not work. She was alone almost all the time. She has limited financial support, living off her husband's pay. She had not planned on being a mother so soon and was not well prepared to be a parent either emotionally or with sufficient knowledge and skill. She had become increasingly depressed and had received medication for her condition. She felt isolated. She had no activities or hobbies and spent most of her time watching TV.

She began to share that she felt distanced from the child and often even felt annoyed by the child. She recognized the child was not responsible for her situation but sometimes felt that way. She had made friends with the girlfriends and wives of other soldiers in her husband's unit. However, she only was in contact with those who did not have children. It was those people who had been at the home the

night of the reported incident. The young mother was socially involved with those friends but only recreationally, and, of course, the friends were much more involved in partying and social activities that did not involve children. They encouraged the young mother to accompany them which she wanted to do but could not because of her child and insufficient income to pay for babysitters.

During early interviews, the young mother continued to deny that she had left the child alone. As the initial assessment continued and more was revealed about the young mother's circumstances and her emotional state, she began to disclose her resentment for the child, her guilt over her feelings about the child, and her desire to be away from the child. The desire to be away from the child appeared to be related to her feelings about being a mother and her desire for adult companionship and fun. She said, "I'm almost a child myself." Eventually she admitted that she had left the child the night of the reported incident and had left the child on two other occasions. She attempted to rationalize her behavior and decisions. She said she made sure that the child was asleep before she left and that she took precautions to make sure the baby would be safe while she was out. She said she believed that the baby would be safe in her crib.

When CPS initiated the initial assessment/investigation (at the first contact with the young mother), the baby was not in present danger. Through interviewing and information collection much more was revealed about the mother's situation. Impending danger existed. The baby was living in a state of danger. The initial assessment/investigation concluded that the times the baby was left alone she was in present danger and, while present danger did not occur often, the child was always in impending danger. Without safety intervention, at any time the mother might once again leave the child alone.

## **Closing**

Everyone on the CPS job awhile recognizes present danger. You might say usually identifying present danger is a *no brainer*. Actually it's pretty safe to say that present danger is usually identified in the CPS report. So, in effect, you are often anticipating present danger before you even show up at the home or wherever the child may be located. It is an uncomplicated judgment to identify present danger.

The challenge we face in safety assessment and safety management is really with impending danger. Identifying, understanding, and qualifying impending danger is difficult (sometimes very difficult) and requires conscious, deliberate, and extensive efforts to understand what is going on in a family. Information collection efforts that are isolated to the maltreatment alleged in the CPS report or passive information collection that gathers general facts and information or lacks a guiding purpose can result in missing impending danger. Well, then, of course, if you didn't acknowledge that impending danger is real and exists in some families you wouldn't be noticing it either.

Impending danger is really the main business of CPS. It is the behaviors and situations which result in impending danger that CPS must ultimately do something about—it is what is causing the impending danger that must change during CPS remedial efforts.

You can see how critical it is to know about and understand present danger and impending danger, right?