

Using Child Safety as the Basis for Case Closing



Introduction

When do you close an ongoing CPS case? When do you open a case to ongoing CPS? You close a case for the exact opposite reasons you open a case. You open a case to ongoing CPS because a child's safety is in jeopardy and there is no responsible adult willing or able to protect the child. You close an ongoing CPS case because there are no threats to a child's safety or a responsible adult is willing and able to protect the child. Sure, it is true that some agencies open cases for ongoing CPS for reasons other than threats and protection (like children at risk of maltreatment or prevention of maltreatment). However, legitimately, CPS authority really is tied to child safety. In other words, if parents and caregivers refuse services and the child is safe, then CPS does not have the authority to coerce participation. If a child is not safe, CPS can invoke the authority of the court to support opening the case to ongoing CPS and to require parents and caregivers to participate with CPS. Well, you likely already know this, but the point we want to make is that safety truly is the primary basis for determining who CPS serves and when the ongoing CPS job is done—when the case is closed.

This article considers using child safety as the basis for case closing. How is child safety measured at the conclusion of CPS intervention? What are the family and home circumstances that must prevail in order to judge that a child is safe at case closure? How can you have confidence that the circumstances indicating and

supporting child safety at closure can be expected to endure? Do the same concepts associated with child safety during CPS intervention apply to judging child safety at closure?

The Safe Home

Let's start this business with consideration of the concept of the safe home. Here's the idea: The objective of ongoing CPS is to establish a safe home for a child, and, once that is accomplished, the case can be closed. The concept of the safe home actually comes from the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). So, ASFA contains requirements and expectations that support the idea of establishing safe homes as the intervention objective of CPS. What is a safe home?

Similar to other requirements in ASFA, no elaboration exists within the law about what constitutes a safe home. However, years of CPS practice and common sense help us to know how to qualify what a safe home must look like. Here are the characteristics of a safe home:

- **ABSENCE OR CONTROL OF THREATS OF SEVERE HARM (impending danger)**

A safe home does not contain active threats to a child's safety. If any family conditions exist that might be threatening, they are being effectively managed and controlled. The absence or control of impending danger is well established, meaning that sufficient evidence exists supporting this judgment, and sufficient time has elapsed to conclude this status is absolutely confirmed.

- **PRESENCE OF CAREGIVER PROTECTIVE CAPACITIES**

A safe home exists because those with the assigned responsibility for child safety are assuring that protection is available and occurring. Caregiver

protective capacities should be the focus of ongoing CPS intervention. Intervention goals for growth and change provide a frame of reference for enhancement of diminished caregiver protective capacities. Routine progress evaluations provide evidence for the process of change and the desired enhancement. The presence of sufficient caregiver protective capacities as well established must be confirmed at case closure as fundamental to the concept of the safe home. Central to this confirmation is evidence that enhanced caregiver protective capacities will endure following case closure.

- **EXISTING & EXPERIENCED REFUGE**

A safe home is a place where a record exists concerning a child being protected and safe. For this reason, it can never make any sense that cases can be closed at the time a child is reunified with his family. A safe home is a refuge which means a safe haven, a place of protection, a harbor from anything that threatens safety. The safe home as a refuge is the first and most obvious place a child thinks of and goes to be safe. Confirming a home as a refuge requires that sufficient time transpire where continual protective care is occurring and observed by CPS.

- **PERCEIVED & FELT SECURITY**

A safe home is perceived and felt by a child as a place of security. A measure of a safe home is the extent to which children see their home as safe and feel safe when they are in the home. This translates into how they view and feel about their protectors – their parents or caregivers. Once a 7-year-old boy was asked in a school exercise: when do you feel most safe? His answer was: when I'm with my dad. This simple anecdote is an example of perceived and felt security.

■ CONFIDENCE IN CONSISTENCY

You can count on a safe home remaining safe. This characteristic serves as a sort of qualifier for the other characteristics. When a case is to be successfully closed, a part of the judgment about success is whether the growth and changes that have occurred are likely to remain in effect. It is for that reason that we emphasize the need to allow enough time and experience with caregivers and the home to confirm that the positive things that have occurred are occurring with such clarity and frequency that they appear to be certain to endure.

Reasons for Closure

The overarching reason for closing a CPS case is that the safe definition has been met. Remember what that definition is? It is the underpinning for all decision making during the case and therefore for intervention itself. The definition for safe is that no threats of severe harm exist or sufficient caregiver protective capacities exist to assure protection against any threats of severe harm. Given that definition as the foundation for decisions at case closure, let's break that down into three specific reasons for case closure using safety as the criterion:

- 1. Caregiver protective capacities are such that child safety is assured through internal means within the family. A safe home exists.*

Sure, we'll accept any of these three reasons for closure, but this one may stand out as the highest mark we're shooting for. This reason concludes that parents or caregivers have grown and changed so that diminished caregiver protective capacities are now enhanced. The internal means for protection in this reason refers to caregivers' functioning and protective capacities. Whether threats exist, are reduced, or do not exist is not the issue. The question is fixed on a confirmation that caregivers can and will

protect no matter what they face. Sufficient time, experience with caregivers, and evidence has occurred and exists to confirm this reason.

2. *Caregiver protective capacities and functioning are marginal but are sufficient, and motivation exists to allow external sources to provide and assure child safety. A safe home exists because it is imposed (or achieved) by the broader family network including relatives, friends, neighbors or others or through sustained attachment to professional services.*

You may notice that in this reason for closure we've switched from the emphasis on caregiver protective capacities to the family network. This broadens our thinking as we accept that sometimes caregivers do not improve their protective capacities and functioning sufficient to independently provide protection. However, sometimes these caregivers grow and change enough to capitalize on, allow for, and effectively use family or professional resources to help them make sure their children are safe. So this reason accommodates two realistic options: (a) a family network idea that accepts that others within the family network can be confirmed to be highly motivated, able and convicted to work in tandem with caregivers to make sure children are safe and will continue to be safe following CPS intervention; and (b) a highly effective, well accepted, confirmed and continuing arrangement between caregivers and community professionals which can be counted on to assure protection and remain in effect.

3. *Caregivers and the family network are functioning insufficiently to provide a safe home through their own means or those external to the family. An alternative family with a safe home is provided for the child to assure both child safety and child permanence.*

This is a necessary alternative reason for closing CPS cases and for moving safety intervention toward some acceptable conclusion. Of course this

refers to safe long-term foster care homes or adoptive homes that provide the final answer for a child's safety and also for permanency. As a reason for closure, this allows CPS decision makers to successfully conclude intervention based on the merits of CPS practice and decision making—the process of intervention—rather than client success alone. We mentioned that reason #1 seems to be the most desirable reason for closing a case. But reason #3 can also be considered to be a successful outcome from a child safety perspective since protection is our ultimate objective.

Each of these results can be revealed and confirmed through an assessment of the caregiver and family characteristics and qualities that comprise and form the basis for a safe home. The judgment concerning each attribute of a safe home is based on case data occurring during CPS intervention and routinely evaluated during case evaluation. Next month we add to the subject of safety-based case closures by identifying and considering the case data that supports the three reasons for case closure and for confirming the existence of a safe home. The February article is entitled “Evidence for a Safe Home.” Stay tuned.