

No Adult in the Home Is Performing Parenting Duties and Responsibilities that Assure Child Safety

Introduction

Every safety assessment method that we are aware of contains a list of safety threats. These threats serve as the criteria on which safety is judged. Sometimes these safety threats are referred to as safety factors or safety concerns. In our judgment, these lists refer to family conditions, behaviors, situations, emotions, intents, perceptions or attitudes which threaten a child's safety and exist as impending danger.

This month we begin a series of articles which explores and examines in detail these safety threats. Even though we may be referring to various threats in different language than what is used in your safety assessment, we hope you'll be able to make the translation.

Definition and Elaboration

We're beginning our exploration by considering "the family situation where there is no *responsible* adult within the home who is performing parenting duties and responsibilities that assure child safety." This refers only to adults in a caregiving role with caregiver responsibilities. This does not refer to adults who might be temporarily in the home or are in the home but have never been expected to perform caregiver responsibilities.

Parenting duties and responsibilities refer to what is required to assure protection. This includes provision of food, clothing, shelter and supervision. So, duties and responsibilities are to be considered at such a basic level that the absence of these basic provisions directly affect the safety of a child.

This includes situations in which basic care and supervision are not occurring because of the absence of primary caregivers. Primary caregivers' whereabouts may be unknown; primary caregivers' absence from the home may be frequent, unpredictable, sporadic, random or even predictable.

Primary caregivers may be present in the home but incapacitated, so that no able, responsible adult is present to provide protection for a child living in the home. Incapacitation may be pervasive, periodic or situationally induced. Incapacitation may be emotionally or physically related. Incapacitation may be associated with use of substances.

The judgment about this threat is related to any time or at certain specific, critical times. This could include the judgment that a responsible adult is never available to provide protection, or that a responsible adult is not available at certain times to provide protection.

There are essentially two things that we are concerned with here:

- (1) A responsible adult is in the home at the necessary times to meet a child's basic needs.
- (2) A responsible adult is in the home at the necessary time to supervise a child.

Some safety assessment methods contain safety threats about "failure to meet basic needs" and "failure to provide supervision." Those threats are similar to and rolled into this one about no responsible adult in the home.

Application of the Safety Threshold Criteria

A family condition, behavior or situation is only a threat to safety if it meets the safety threshold criteria. (See the article September 2004: [*Considering the Safety Threshold.*](#))

Regarding this threat to safety, the caregiver who is normally responsible for protecting the child is absent, is likely to be absent, or is incapacitated in some way or becomes incapacitated. The incapacitation is such that his or her presence in the home is inconsequential as related to providing basic care and supervision.

The conclusion about incapacitation is important because there are caregivers who are physically, emotionally or mentally limited yet they plan, decide and take action sufficiently to assure that their children's basic needs are met and that their children are supervised. The same is true of some caregivers who use or even abuse substances. The point here is to avoid only considering the caregiver's condition or behavior (such as he drinks too much). What you should do is base your judgment on the effect of the caregiver's condition or behavior. Think about it this way: The threat doesn't exist because the person is physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, cognitively challenged or abuses substances. The threat exists because the person's condition or behavior results in being incapacitated so that no adult in the home is available to care for and protect the children.

For this family condition to rise to the level of a safety threat, nothing or no one within the family can compensate for the absence of the caregiver or the incapacitation of the caregiver. This meets the first criterion of the safety threshold: out of control. An unexplained, unplanned, random, unpredictable or predictable absence of caregivers from the home which results in no responsible adult to provide basic care and supervision represents a situation that is out of control. Emotionally, physically or intellectually incapacitated caregivers who are not able to provide basic care and supervision represent a situation that is out of control.

So, remember, for this family condition to be a safety threat, nothing can control the absence or incapacitation of the caregivers.

As referred to in this safety threat, *duties and responsibilities* are at a critical level. If not met, they pose a specific danger to a vulnerable child. The lack of meeting these basic duties and responsibilities could result in a child being seriously injured, kidnapped, seriously ill, even dying. Regarding absent or incapacitated caregivers (and in the absence of a family network that imposes itself), vulnerable children left without caregivers will suffer serious effects. This is the second safety threshold criteria: severity.

That the severe effects could occur at any time is based on understanding what circumstances are associated with the caregiver's absence or incapacity, the home condition, and the lack of other adult supervisory supports. The absence or incapacitation of caregivers meets the imminence criteria. When the threat (no adult to provide basic care and supervision) exists or can occur at any time, then it is immediate and certain. This is the third safety threshold criteria: imminent.

To be a threat, there must be sufficient information that confirms either the unplanned for absence of a caregiver or the incapacitation of a caregiver. Sufficient information is qualified by evidence of past, present and likely future absence or incapacitation; first hand observation or reliable information sources; and describable circumstances associated with the probability of absence or incapacitation. This meets the fourth criteria: observable and specific.

The issue of no responsible adult in the home to provide basic care and supervision is only a problem if there are vulnerable children in the home. This refers to children who are not able to protect themselves. (See the article February 2003: [The Vulnerable Child](#).) Related to absence or incapacitation resulting in no adult to provide basic care and supervision, you must establish that there is a vulnerable child who will be affected by this family condition. This meets the fifth and final criterion: a vulnerable child.

Examples of this Threat

Sometimes the best way to really understand something is to consider examples. This can be helpful particularly since safety threats contained on safety assessment forms are written in a general way so as to apply to various pertinent case situations. Here are several examples of the threat concerned with no adult in the home to perform duties and responsibilities related to basic care and supervision. Since these examples are conclusions about a family situation, it is important to remember that effective safety assessment requires that you now learn as much as you can about caregivers and a family situation which can lead you to your conclusions.

1. A caregiver's physical or mental disability results in incapacitation rendering the person unable to provide basic care for the children.
2. A caregiver is or has been absent from the home for lengthy periods of time, and no other adults are available to provide basic care.
3. Caregivers have abandoned the children.
4. Caregivers arranged care by an adult, but the caregivers' whereabouts are unknown or they have not returned according to plan, and the adult left in charge is asking for relief.
5. A substance abuse problem renders the caregivers incapable of routinely/consistently attending to the children's basic needs.
6. A caregiver is or will be incarcerated, thereby leaving the children without a responsible adult to provide care.
7. A caregiver does not respond to or ignores a child's basic needs.

8. A caregiver does not or is incapable of supervising a child which results in the child wandering in and out of the home or through the neighborhood without the necessary supervision.
9. A caregiver allows other adults to improperly influence (drugs, alcohol, abusive behavior) the child and the caregiver is present, approves, or is unable to guard against the behavior.
10. A child has been abandoned or left with someone who does not know the caregiver.
11. A caregiver has left a child with someone and not returned as planned.
12. A caregiver did not express plans to return, or the caregiver has been gone longer than expected or what would be normally acceptable.
13. A caregiver leaves a vulnerable child alone and unsupervised occasionally, frequently and planned or unplanned.
14. A caregiver does not or cannot provide a child with necessary food, clothing, shelter and care basic to the child's safety, and no other adult is available to do so in the child's home.
15. No one knows the parent's/caregiver's identity.