

# **The Absence of Basic Resources as a Threat to a Child's Safety**

## **Introduction**

Some family conditions or situations are easier to identify and judge as being threats to child safety than others. You might think of the safety threat we are concerned with this month as a “no brainer” for safety assessment. While that may be somewhat the case, there are some nuances to evaluating whether the absence of resources threaten a child's safety that are worth emphasizing.

## **Maltreatment and Neglect and Poverty**

Notably, it's crucial when judging absence of resources to consider whether we are observing something that is associated with poverty compared to something that fits within the realm of CPS – child maltreatment.

You are accustomed to considering definitions for child abuse or neglect as they appear in state statutes. Such definitions are related to establishing a legal base for state intervention. Legal definitions are not very good at being descriptive about the nature, dynamics and occurrence of forms of maltreatment. Typically, legal definitions mainly emphasize effects such as serious non accidental physical injury. For our purposes here, we need to consider a definition that provides some explanation of what's happening in a family that is associated with or results in maltreatment. So, we'll use this definition for maltreatment:

*Parenting behavior that is harmful and destructive to a child's cognitive, social, emotional and/or physical development and those with parenting responsibility are unwilling or unable to behave differently.*

This definition covers all forms of maltreatment. It emphasizes three things: active or passive parenting behavior, harmful effects on children, and parent volition or capacity. These three issues are crucial when considering whether the absence of basic resources is related to a child's safety. The links of these three dynamics that form maltreatment of any kind are fundamental to establishing the connection of the absence of basic resources to danger.

Howard Dubowitz defines neglect in the *Handbook for Child Protection Practice*. This is an excellent primer that you absolutely ought to have on your shelf. (Dubowitz and De Panfilis. Sage Publications. 2000.) Dubowitz explains the concept further than we'll do here, but basically he states:

*Child neglect is usually defined as omissions in care resulting in significant harm or risk of significant harm to children.*

He clarifies that caregivers are responsible for the omission and that the circumstances of neglect exclude poverty. So, the neglect definition shows us a parallel to our definition of maltreatment. What is fundamental to both is behavior of parents or caregivers that results in the omission of basic care or, as we emphasize here, resources (which actually are associated with provision of basic care) that are necessary to assure a child's safety.

Given the definitions for maltreatment and neglect, what is different or the same about poverty? Let's define poverty for our purposes and keep in mind that often poverty is defined in relation to income, household and size of family which supports the notion of degrees of poverty. Our purposes are to understand poverty from the standpoint of family dynamics and life so that we can distinguish it from that which contributes to threatening child safety.

*Poverty is a family condition which is characterized by unmet need, hardship and a lack of resources to meet the basic needs of the family members which includes insufficient necessary*

*resources, deprivation of essential goods and services, multiple deprivations and a progressive pattern of deprivation.*

A couple of other features of poverty to which you should be sensitive are that such impoverishment actually reduces family members' meaningful participation in their community and regular society discourse. And, the state of being poor as we describe here results in the deprivation of the essentials of well-being including social status.

With these statements about poverty, what do you see that is similar to neglect or maltreatment specific to child safety? Abject poverty notably can meet the same criteria we use to establish the safety threshold: 1) nothing within the family can control the poverty; 2) vulnerable children are in the family; 3) there is the potential for severe effects on the children; 4) the deteriorating circumstances and danger are imminent; and 5) all the impoverished family conditions are clearly specific and observable.

How is poverty different than neglect or threats to safety? Neglect which results in a threat to child safety occurs when parents or caregivers are unwilling or unable to do something about that which results in the absence of basic and necessary care and resources to maintain child safety. In families which are poor, the caregivers possess the will and capacity to provide for their children but lack the opportunity to possess and use necessary resources. Threats to child safety exist when necessary resources do not exist, and caregivers are unwilling or unable to behave in ways to acquire and effectively use necessary resources to assure child safety. Neglectful parenting behavior exists which can result in significant harm to a child because the caregivers are unwilling or unable to get and use necessary resources. Or, alternatively, neglectful caregivers use or expend resources for things other than meeting their children's needs.

Your attention when assessing safety concerned with family conditions that are related to absence of care and resources must therefore be focused on caregivers' behavior, their motives and intentions, their judgment and self-control, their abilities and capacities, and how all those issues result in behavior that deprive children of the essential care and resources that will guarantee their safety.

## **Definition and Elaboration**

When evaluating safety, you are concerned about identifying what exists; it isn't necessary to understand the cause or what has contributed to what exists. That's really more of a concern for treatment and change. So, here we consider the existence of a situation in which danger to a child's safety exists because of the absence of basic resources. While you might include basic care that a caregiver provides to a child, the real issue here is more about the absence of assets and wherewithal that a child requires to be safe. This is not about the means necessary to influence the quality of life but about what is absolutely essential to assure a child's safety. Basic care associated with safety is not occurring because of the absence of resources.

This safety threat is absolutely associated with basic needs. Not to overplay the issue of needs in our consideration here, it doesn't hurt to frame this appropriately within the context of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Briefly, you know that we as humans possess and are driven by lower and higher needs. The lower needs begin with the biological and physiological needs and progress to the safety needs. Now, not all the needs within these two areas are specific to our discussion, but some directly are:

1. **Biological and Physiological needs** - air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sleep
2. **Safety needs** - protection from elements, security, health

What is clear when we focus on the relevant needs associated with these lower human needs is that when these are not effectively met children can suffer in severe ways. The absence of resources to meet these basic needs exists as a direct threat to a child's safety.

BUT, as we've cautioned, the absence of resources is only a CPS concern if it can be established that caregiver behavior is associated with the absence of resources and the caregiver is unwilling or unable to behave differently, if the caregiver is unwilling or unable to acquire and supply the necessary resources.

Arguably some families become involved with CPS as a result of a lack of resources which may even affect a child's safety even though the caregivers are willing and capable of acquiring and using resources appropriately. Families that lack necessary resources for reasons other than caregiver motivation, willingness and capacity may require and benefit from general social services but should not be involved in CPS intervention. The ingredient that is missing for these kinds of families is opportunity – the opportunity for their circumstances to be different so that acquiring and using resources on behalf of their children becomes a reality.

## **Personal Values**

This will be brief. It is important to acknowledge that personal values can be an influence in mistaking a family's situation for being a safety threat when it doesn't meet the safety threshold. Without being qualified, "absence of resources" and "basic care" are conditions within families that are subject to personal values, personal preferences; personal experience, personal sensibilities; and personal judgment. It is likely that a *person in the street* survey of 10 people would result in various and different perceptions and conclusions about what constitutes an absence of basic care or necessary resources. These differences could be understood as related to the different values that each person surveyed holds. To some, not having a flat screen digital television would be an example of absence

of resources. To some, an unkempt, run down, poorly furnished house would be considered an absence of resources. To some, children not getting a highly nutritional meal or missing meals would be considered not receiving basic care. To some, children not being involved in extracurricular activities would be considered not receiving basic care. You probably get the point here. Personal values are based on what we consider to be important and defining in our lives. These values, particularly related to parenting, family life, family resources and the family home, may be different from families CPS assesses with respect to culture, class and situation. We must be certain that when assessing for safety related to basic care and absence of resources that the safety threshold is applied and that a direct connection can be made between the absence of basic care and the absence of necessary resources and the danger those conditions present to a child. We must avoid value judgments when assessing safety related to this safety threat or any other.

### **Application of the Safety Threshold Criteria**

There could be two things out of control here. There are not sufficient resources to meet the basic - safety needs of the child. There is nothing within the family's reach to address and control the absence of needed protective resources. The second question of control is concerned with the caregiver's lack of control related to either impulses about use of resources or problem solving concerning acquiring and using resources.

For your consideration, we acknowledge that this threat to safety can easily be seen as being related to or overlapping with the threat concerned with caregiver self- control. (Refer to the article *Caregivers are Out of Control* August 2007.) It is reasonable that some safety assessments could result in the indication of both threats when a caregiver's inability to manage their judgments, emotions and behaviors directly results in mismanagement of necessary resources to assure child safety. This could very well be appropriate in order to document two serious issues associated with a child's safety: the lack of caregiver self-control and the

absence of necessary resources. The identification of these two facts in a family is essential to effective safety planning and safety management.

Regarding this threat, be aware that the lack of resources must be so acute that the absence could have a severe effect right away. The absence of these basic resources could cause serious injury, serious medical or physical health problems, starvation, or serious malnutrition.

Imminence is judged by context. What context exists today concerning the lack of resources? If extreme weather conditions or sustained absence of food define the context, then the certainty of severe effects occurring soon is evident. This certainty is influenced by the specific characteristics of a vulnerable child (e.g., infant, ill, fragile, etc.).

### **Examples of the Threat**

This threat is illustrated in the following examples.

- The family has no money for safety-related necessities and resources because caregivers do not pursue and maintain gainful employment.
- The family has no money for safety-related necessities and resources because caregivers do not seek out and/or use available basic services such as food stamps, housing, food or clothing banks, etc.
- As a result of caregiver emotional or behavioral functioning or decision making, the family has no food, clothing, or shelter; the family may be homeless; may be living out of a car.
- Parents/caregivers lack life management skills to acquire and properly use resources when they are available.
- Caregivers are routinely using their resources for things (e.g., recreation drugs) other than basic care and support, thereby leaving them unable to meet the safety needs of their children.

- Caregivers' functioning and decision making are such that a child's basic safety needs are not met; resources are not available; resources are not being used appropriately.
- Caregiver limitations result in the inability to gain, sustain and use resources to assure a child's safety.