

# Creating a Picture

## Introduction



As an Investigation or Initial Assessment worker, your essential responsibility is to judge child safety. Your job is to determine whether impending danger exists when a case is assigned to you. When you encounter a family, your growing understanding of the family is what results in you being able to confidently justify the existence of any one or more of these impending danger threats<sup>1</sup>:

- ❖ No resources to meet the child's basic safety needs
- ❖ Dangerous living arrangements
- ❖ Intentions to hurt a child with no remorse
- ❖ Extremely unrealistic expectations or extremely negative perceptions of a child
- ❖ No adult in the home will perform essential parental duties and responsibilities
- ❖ Caregivers who fear they will maltreat the child and/or who request placement
- ❖ A lack of parenting knowledge, skills, and motivation essential to protecting a child
- ❖ Violent caregivers
- ❖ Caregivers who cannot control their behavior
- ❖ A child with exceptional needs which the caregivers cannot or will not meet
- ❖ A child who is extremely fearful of the home situation or people within the home

1The impending danger list of threats may not be exactly the same as the one you use in your state and, of course, you should reference your list of impending danger threats as you consider this article.

In order to evaluate the existence of impending danger, you must learn all you can about a family which is pertinent to the evaluation. There are six assessment questions about family functioning that are pertinent to this evaluation:

1. What is the extent of the maltreatment in the family?
2. What are the circumstances that surround the maltreatment?
3. How do the children in the family function?
4. How do the adults in the family function?
5. What are the general parenting practices?
6. What are the disciplinary practices in the family?

Through the collection of this information, you “create a picture” of the pervasive functioning occurring among adults and children within the family. This “picture” represents a merging of crucial information which reveals the presence or absence of impending danger threats to child safety, vulnerable children, and caregiver protective capacities. You begin forming this picture as you proceed with information collection and finalize it at the conclusion of the Investigation/Initial Assessment.

Did you notice what this last sentence just stated? The picture you create of the family is finalized at the end of the Investigation/Initial Assessment. It is not based on what you understand at the onset of the Investigation/Initial Assessment. What you know when you first encounter a family really isn’t much of a picture about who these people are and how they operate together. Understanding comes from a diligent, exerted, and focused approach to information collection.

## Part of a Picture



The reality is that much of what is going on in CPS information collection which supports safety decision making results in only part of a picture of the family. Basically this can be explained by information collection that is biased toward reconciling allegations of maltreatment. Workers are so focused on proving or disproving the events and occurrences associated with the maltreatment that they end up only producing a portion of a picture of the family. But it is the full picture of the family that exposes the impending danger (which we will demonstrate later as we map all of this for you).

We recently combined findings about information collection from several case studies we've conducted. Generally the results of these studies demonstrate that Investigation/Initial Assessment workers are busy interviewing and expending sufficient level of effort which could result in a full understanding of a family. However, it usually isn't happening. As workers zero in on the maltreatment, they typically end up with less information to complete the picture of the family necessary for assessing safety (in full dimension, subject, tone, hue, color and contrast).

Consider this. In 532 cases we studied, we considered the question: *Is the quality and adequacy of information in the record sufficient to support effective investigation and safety decision making?* Expert reviewers concluded that in 76% of those cases the answer was "no"! That means  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the cases did not contain sufficient information to support effective decision making. This is a

serious statement about the creation of only part of a picture of the family. This has obvious implications.

### **Creating a Picture**



So, here we have a picture of a family. From this picture you can describe some things that are true of this family. These are young parents with two pre-school children. The adults and children in the family are attractive and well groomed. They appear to have been happy at the time the picture was taken. This is a Caucasian family. What else can you tell from this picture? What can you be certain of? We cannot know about how the individuals in this family function. We do not know about such things as jobs, education, resources or home setting. We know nothing of personal habits, behavior, routines, values and needs. The picture doesn't reveal the nature or quality of relationships in this family. The picture doesn't inform us about the approach to parenting that these adults take or how the children are developing. To know this family....to have a full and accurate depiction or picture of this family...it will be necessary to explore in detail areas of functioning, behavior, relationship, emotions, and social connections. Here is where we return to the six assessment questions identified earlier. Let's consider what you can learn about a family by looking at what is relevant to each of these questions.

### *What Is the Extent of the Maltreatment?*



This is straightforward information concerned with facts and evidence which support the presence of maltreatment. This information comes from your observations, interviews, and corroboration. This includes making a conclusion (substantiation) about the type of maltreatment (sexual abuse, lack of supervision, and so on) and the specific symptoms and facts (injuries/constant hitting) which are consistent with the maltreatment.

### *What Are the Surrounding Circumstances Which Accompany the Maltreatment?*



This assessment question qualifies the maltreatment by placing it in a context or situation that (1) precedes or leads up to the maltreatment or (2) exists while the maltreatment is occurring. You attempt to understand what was happening when the maltreatment occurred, what was associated with the maltreatment, what influenced the maltreatment? This includes peoples' perceptions, attitudes, and explanations about the maltreatment. This includes history and duration. By selectively examining this question separate from the actual maltreatment, you

achieve greater understanding of how serious the maltreatment is. In other words, the circumstances that accompany the maltreatment are important and are significant in and of themselves yet qualify how serious the maltreatment is.

*How Does the Child Function?*



This assessment question is qualified by the age of the child. Functioning is considered with respect to age appropriateness. Age appropriateness is applied against the “normalcy” standard. So, it is critical that you have a working understanding of child development given that you consider how a child is functioning with respect to what is expected given the child's age. Among the areas you consider in information collecting and "assessing" are trust, sociability, self-awareness and acceptance, verbal skills/communication, independence, assertiveness, motor skills, intellect and mental performance, self-control, emotion, play and work, behavior patterns, mood changes, eating and sleeping habits, and sexual behavior. Additionally, you consider the child's physical capabilities including vulnerability and ability to make needs known. You are searching to understand how the child is from day to day – in general.

### *How Do the Adults Function?*



This assessment question has strictly to do with how adults (the caregivers) in a family are functioning personally and presently in their everyday lives (as adults). It is concerned with life management, social relationships, meeting needs, problem solving. Among the things you would be concerned about in gathering information and assessing are behavior, communication, ability to relate to others, intellect, self-control, problem solving, coping, impulsiveness, and stress management. It also includes adult mental health and substance use. It is concerned with whether role performance is influenced by mental health or substance abuse. It includes perception, rationality, self-control, reality testing, stability, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-acceptance, and coherence. It is important to remember that recent (adult-related) history is captured here such as employment experiences, criminal history, previous relationships, and so on.

### *What are the General Parenting Practices?*



When considering this assessment question, it is important to keep distinctively centered on the overall parenting that is occurring and not allow

anything related to the maltreatment incident or discipline to shade your point of view. Among the issues for consideration within this assessment question are: parenting styles and the origin of the style, basic care, affection, communication, expectations for children, sensitivity to an individual child, knowledge and expectations related to child development and parenting, reasons for having children, viewpoint toward children, examples of parenting behavior and parenting experiences.

*What Are the Disciplinary Practices?*



This assessment question focuses information collection into one area of parenting - discipline of children. This assessment question explores the caregiver's methods, the source of those methods, purpose or reasons for, attitudes about, context of, expectations of discipline, understanding, relationship to child and child behavior, meaning of discipline. You understand more about this area of inquiry by enlarging it beyond punishment and behavioral control to socialization, teaching, and guidance. How do caregivers conceive of reasons for discipline? What are the circumstances when they employ disciplinary practices?

So, there you have a synopsis of what the assessment questions can provide in creating a picture of a family. It's hard to imagine that anyone would not see the value of sufficient information in these areas as critical to understanding a family and assessing child safety. Perhaps we can create a sort of map to show the relationship between these assessment questions and the two key variables to evaluating child safety: impending danger threats and caregiver protective capacities.

## Mapping Information Collection to Safety Assessment



### Assessment Questions

What is the extent of maltreatment?

What are the circumstances that surround the maltreatment?

REVEAL



INFORMATION  
ABOUT

#### IMPENDING DANGER

- ❑ The family does not have resources to meet the child's basic safety needs.
- ❑ Living arrangements seriously endanger a child's physical health.
- ❑ One or both caregivers intend(ed) to hurt the child and/or show no remorse.

**Assessment Question**  
How does the child function?

REVEALS



INFORMATION  
ABOUT

IMPENDING DANGER	CHILD VULNERABILITY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Child has exceptional needs which the caregivers cannot or will not meet.</li> <li>❑ Child is extremely fearful of the home situation or people within the home.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Ability to protect self</li> <li>❑ Access to and assertiveness to seek out help and protection</li> <li>❑ Susceptibility</li> </ul>

**Assessment Question**  
How do the adults function?

REVEALS



INFORMATION  
ABOUT

IMPENDING DANGER	CAREGIVER PROTECTIVE CAPACITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ One or both caregivers are violent.</li> <li>❑ One or both caregivers cannot control their behavior.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❑ Takes action</li> <li>❑ Physical capacity to protect</li> <li>❑ Emotional control</li> <li>❑ Reality oriented</li> <li>❑ Accurately processes information</li> <li>❑ Assertive and responsive</li> <li>❑ Adaptive</li> <li>❑ Resilient</li> <li>❑ Stable</li> <li>❑ Meets own needs</li> <li>❑ Intellectually able</li> <li>❑ Impulse control</li> </ul>

### Assessment Questions

What are the general parenting practices?  
What are the disciplinary practices?

REVEAL



INFORMATION  
ABOUT

IMPENDING DANGER	CAREGIVER PROTECTIVE CAPACITIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ One or both caregivers have extremely unrealistic expectations or extremely negative perceptions of a child.</li><li>❑ No adult in the home will perform parental duties and responsibilities.</li><li>❑ One or both caregivers fear they will maltreat the child and/or request placement.</li><li>❑ One or both caregivers lack parenting knowledge, skills, and motivation essential to protecting a child.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ Understands protective role</li><li>❑ Recognizes Threats</li><li>❑ History of being protective</li><li>❑ Impulse control in parenting</li><li>❑ Sets asides own needs</li><li>❑ Love</li><li>❑ Sensitivity toward child</li><li>❑ Empathy for child</li><li>❑ Emotional bond</li><li>❑ Positive attachment</li><li>❑ Recognizes child's needs</li><li>❑ Realistic expectations for child</li><li>❑ Accurate perception of child</li><li>❑ Adequate knowledge</li></ul>

### What Does the Picture of a Family You Create Look Like?

