

# **Assessing Caregiver Protective Capacities Related to Parenting**

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## **Introduction**

To effectively assess safety you consider the presence of family conditions and behaviors that pose a danger to a child and you consider the capacity a caregiver possesses to provide protection.<sup>1</sup> Assessing caregiver protective capacities is crucial during a family functioning assessment.<sup>2</sup> So, this month we take a look at that kind of assessment.

Caregiver protective capacities are personal characteristics that contribute to a person being protective of their children. These capacities are apparent in three domains: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. They can be grouped in relationship to general adult functioning<sup>3</sup> and parenting. In this article we will focus on caregiver protective capacities associated with parenting.

## **Caregiver Protective Capacities and General Parenting**

### *Cognitive Protective Capacities Related to Parenting*

Caregivers are more likely to be protective when they understand their protective role. They recognize when their child's safety is threatened. They have an accurate perception of their child. They accurately recognize their child's needs. They possess adequate knowledge about child development, parenting, and protection. They have realistic expectations for their child.

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<sup>1</sup> A child is unsafe when there is present or impending danger and insufficient caregiver protective capacities.

<sup>2</sup> The family functioning assessment is also referred to as investigation, initial assessment, and initial family assessment.

<sup>3</sup> Protective capacities that are associated with how an adult functions in general do have a bearing on parenting and are assessed in relation to information about how the adult functions as an individual separate from being a caregiver.

### *Emotional Protective Capacities Related to Parenting*

Caregivers are more likely or motivated to be protective when they demonstrate love toward their child. They are sensitive toward their child. They have empathy for their child. They are emotionally bonded to their child. They feel a positive attachment to their child.

### *Behavioral Protective Capacities Related to Parenting*

Caregivers are more likely to be protective when they have a history of being protective. They control their impulses in parenting situations. They are successful at setting aside their own needs.

## **Information Collection Related to Parenting and Caregiver Protective Capacities**

Something that supervisors and workers are realizing is that the various caregiver protective capacities serve as prompts for information collection. You can see from the capacities identified above related to parenting that you can tailor your efforts during family functioning assessment information collection to explore those areas. For instance, you could plan to have a conversation with a parent about her attitudes and interaction with her child to consider how sensitive she is toward her child. In that instance, your interest is to better understand if she is sensitive toward her child which is important information to judging her protectiveness.

Now the thing is...you can't simply ask questions based on the caregiver protective capacities in order to understand them and how they are operating. Think about that for a moment. What would you expect a caregiver to say if you asked him if he loved his child? Yes, right? What would you expect if you asked a mother if she recognized her child's needs? She'd say yes in all probability. Is her saying "yes" enough for you to really know the answer to the question? So,

information collection is pursued through conversations about parenting in general as opposed to asking yes or no questions about caregiver protective capacities.

Conversations can consider responses caregivers give and explore them. For instance, it is not unusual for a caregiver to say that the most important part of parenting is love. What does that mean to the person? How does that occur in the person's parenting? How does that influence the person? Can she describe a recent time or event that she remembers and talk about the emotions consistent with her point of view about the importance of love. You see...by doing this kind of conversational information collecting (and actually information processing) with a caregiver you stimulate revelation. That means through the conversation the caregiver reveals herself; she reveals personal characteristics; she reveals qualities and dimensions of her capacities which do or do not contribute to being protective.

What sort of content is relevant for a conversation about a caregiver's approach to parenting? Here's a list of potential conversation topics you can have with a caregiver:

- What does the person know about child development?
- What does the person know about parenting? What is the person's parenting style? Where did it come from?
- What does the person think she does best as a parent? Is she able to talk about her skill as a parent?
- What are the person's child rearing attitudes and expectations?
- How does the person communicate with her child?
- In what ways does the person think about, talk about, and perceive her child?
- How does the person include the child in her life?
- What examples show how the person accepts her responsibilities as a parent?
- How and when does the person play with the child?
- How does the person view child rearing in terms of difficulty, complexity, or challenge?

- When talking about parenting, is the person centered on herself or her child?
- What examples and experiences are discussed that show the person is bonded with the child?
- How does the person manage parenting frustrations?
- What is the person's history of parenting?
- What sort of expectations does the person have for herself as a parent?
- What expectations does the person have for her child?
- How does the person describe her child (subjectively versus objectively; accurate perceptions; in understanding ways related to age, capacity, strengths, limitations)?
- How satisfied is the person as a parent?
- How does the person describe and demonstrate affection and attachment?
- In what ways does the person demonstrate acceptance of the child?
- How does the person approach child management and discipline?
- How does the person describe her purposes for discipline, her methods, her success?
- How does the person describe daily interaction with the child?
- How does the person describe daily routine and specifically the child's routine?

These questions provide options for conversations with caregivers. We are not suggesting this as an interviewing or assessment list. It's not necessary for you to cover all of these areas. You will find when you are discussing any of these topics there is a natural tendency to lead into other topics, and within a relatively short period of time the caregiver will have revealed a great deal about his parenting attitudes and practices and about his personal characteristics that are caregiver protective capacities.

### **Analyzing Information about Parenting to Understand Caregiver Protective Capacities**

Okay. Where are we? You are conducting a family functioning assessment (i.e., investigation or initial assessment). You have a conversation (interview) with a mother and focus the information collection and effort on understanding the mother's approach to parenting. The conversation you have with the mother

lasts over thirty minutes. You learn a lot about the mother's approach based on discussing many of the topics listed above. Later you are thinking about what you have learned and now are faced with analyzing the information in order to judge the nature, quality, and effectiveness of the mother's caregiver protective capacities. So...how do you do that?

1. You can reflect what you know about a mom's parenting against the list of caregiver protective capacities.

*I know the mother says her approach to parenting is to love her children unconditionally yet she is unable to say how that plays out in her behavior in any specific way. That seems related to the protective capacity of demonstrating love.*

2. You can reflect a caregiver protective capacity against what you know about a mom's parenting.

*What did the mom say to me about how important love is in her parenting? She told me several experiences where she applied loving attitudes and behavior toward her child; she emphasized how important affection is and described incidences of expressed affection; I observed her interacting with her child in loving ways.*

3. You can analyze specific things you know about a mom's parenting characteristics by applying criteria:

 Does the characteristic prepare or contribute to a child's caregiver being protective? If the characteristic is diminished or ineffective, could it lessen protectiveness?

*For instance, this might include facts about the caregiver's knowledge of child development or specific parenting skill.*

- Does the characteristic enable or empower the child's caregiver to be protective? If the characteristic is diminished or ineffective, could it lessen protectiveness?

*For instance, this might involve the caregiver's emotions and perceptions held toward a child.*

- Is the characteristic necessary or fundamental to being protective? If the characteristic is diminished or ineffective, could it lessen protectiveness?

*For instance, this might be related to the caregiver's physical health and strength.*

- Must the characteristic exist prior to being protective? If the characteristic does not exist, has not developed or is underdeveloped, could it lessen protectiveness?

*For instance, this might be related to the caregiver's ability to correctly read reality.*

- Can the characteristic be related to acting or being able to act on behalf of a child? If the characteristic is diminished or ineffective, could it lessen protectiveness?

*For instance, this might involve the caregiver's mental health.*

- Is the characteristic a compelling influence, motivation, and reason for behaving in protective ways? If the characteristic is diminished or ineffective, could it lessen protectiveness?

*For instance, this might include bonding, love, deep affection, and attachment.*

## **An Experience Assessing Caregiver Protective Capacities Related to Parenting**

Do you want to try out what we've been talking about? Here's an opportunity to assess caregiver protective capacities related to parenting. You can watch the video that provides information about Gloria Martinez. It's less than seven minutes. What may surprise you is how much Gloria reveals about her parenting and about her caregiver protective capacities. As you are watching the video, you might notice the topics the interviewer covers. You may also want to jot down notes about things you think are important and that you are learning about Gloria. After you've watched the video, think about what you've learned and contrast that against the ways we mentioned about how to analyze information about parenting. Then print out the following page, using the check list to identify "yes" for caregiver protective capacities that exist and appear enhanced, "no" for those that do not exist or appear to be diminished, and "unknown" for those you simply do not have enough information to judge.

You might consider making this a better experience by doing a couple of other things. After completing the check list, consider writing down your justification for what you've concluded. When you do that think about what the intervention implications are for what you've concluded about Gloria's caregiver protective capacities. Another thing you might do is consider having a discussion with a colleague who has also gone through this exercise. Together you can check out how your analyses are similar or different and what might explain that; you can discuss rationale and implications for how what you've learned and concluded will influence decision making about this case.

Click on the link to play the [Gloria Martinez Parenting and Caregiver Protective Capacity](#) video.

**Gloria’s Caregiver Protective Capacities<sup>4</sup> Related to Parenting**

Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Understands protective role
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Recognizes threats
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	History of being protective
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Impulse control in parenting
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Sets asides own needs
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Demonstrates love
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Sensitivity toward child
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Empathy for child
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Emotional bond
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Displays positive attachment
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Accurately recognizes child’s needs
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Realistic expectations for child
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Accurate perception of child
Yes <input type="checkbox"/>	No <input type="checkbox"/>	Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	Adequate knowledge

Do you want to justify your conclusions here? [Check out the next page before you quit.]

**Just for Fun**

Earlier we mentioned that there are cognitive, behavioral, and emotional caregiver protective capacities related to adult functioning. This refers to personal characteristics that are apparent about a person regardless if he is a

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<sup>4</sup> You may notice that this kind of assessment can result in the identification of positive, enhanced caregiver protective capacities along side of those that are diminished. This underscores that while caregivers may be challenged in some areas they possess specific strengths in other areas. These enhanced caregiver protective capacities can be supported and relied upon for motivation to strengthen how they parent and their protectiveness.

parent. These are characteristics that are typical of how the person (as an adult) functions on a daily basis.

With Gloria, the interviewer focused on her parenting. What you know though is people reveal things about who they are as adults as they talk about anything. So, in the conversation, Gloria was responding about her parenting but also saying a lot about herself as an adult separate from being a parent.

Just for fun, if you like, take a stab at considering what you learned about Gloria as an adult and draw conclusions about her personal characteristics that could contribute to or lessen her being protective. If you feel like carrying this to the limit, we've provided a place for you to justify your conclusions. Print this page out also to identify the characteristics typical of how Gloria functions on a daily basis apart from parenting.

### Gloria's Adult Functioning

- |                              |                             |                                  |                                  |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Takes action                     |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Physically able                  |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Displays emotional control       |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Reality oriented                 |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Accurately processes information |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Assertive and responsive         |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Adaptive                         |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Resilient                        |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Stable                           |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Can meets own needs              |
| Yes <input type="checkbox"/> | No <input type="checkbox"/> | Unknown <input type="checkbox"/> | Intellectually able              |

Do you want to justify your conclusions here?