

Q and A about Safety Intervention

February 2011

Introduction

We continue the series devoted to addressing questions that commonly occur in daily practice, supervisor consultation, the classroom, etc. These questions are considered often and explained as we continue our work to improve safety intervention. We believe that even as we “re-answer” questions or address areas we’ve written extensively about once again it serves the purpose of bringing more precision to our understanding of safety intervention. It keeps us striving for continued improvement in practice and decision making.

Question

Why shouldn't I conclude that children are not safe in general when I identify them to be in present danger at the first contact?

Answer

Within this question there seems to exist a logical observation that if you find that a child is in present danger – say a toddler roaming the streets unattended – he is unsafe. It’s logical to draw that conclusion. And, in fact, at the time you encounter the unsupervised child in the street he is in danger and unsafe. However, the question asks about being unsafe in general. This is an important distinction for these reasons:

- In almost all situations involving present danger you only have enough information about what is going on to conclude that the child is unsafe at the time of your observation. You can conclude that the child is unsafe within the event or circumstances you have found him. However, you most

likely cannot know whether what you have encountered is definitive of the child's situation, the first time it occurred, an anomaly with respect to the child's situation, consistent with caregiver protective capacity, and typical of family functioning.

- The purpose of the family functioning assessment (AKA initial assessment or investigation) is to determine if a child is in impending danger (e.g., a state of danger, not safe in general.) Present danger that you identify may be an active expression of what's going on regularly or from time to time that confirms impending danger. However, it may not...as mentioned in the previous bullet. The point is additional information collection and understanding of the family is necessary to reach a conclusion that a child is not safe in general (i.e., impending danger.) Of course in concert with other information you come to know, the present danger you identified at the onset can provide compelling evidence about the impending danger once compared to family functioning at large.

It's also always important to remember that sometimes you conduct an initial contact and find no present danger, yet, that does not mean you can conclude that a child is generally safe. You can only conclude the child is safe at the time of your encounter with the case. The reconciliation of the question about generally safe or unsafe always requires the completion of the entire family functioning assessment.

Remember, you don't want to involve a family with CPS into ongoing services based on concluding a child is not safe in general because you first identified present danger. You want to involve a family with CPS in ongoing services because the child lives in impending danger and caregiver protective capacities are in need of enhancement.

Question

How do the six assessment questions confirm and justify the existence of impending danger?

Answer

As a reminder, the six assessment questions that inform and support safety intervention are:

- 1) What is the extent of maltreatment?
- 2) What circumstances surround the maltreatment?
- 3) How do the children function on a daily basis?
- 4) How do the adults function on a daily basis?
- 5) What are the parenting practices in general?
- 6) What are the disciplinary practices?

Also remember that the information collection expectation during the family functioning assessment is to diligently interview and collect information related to these six assessment questions in order to reveal as full an understanding of a family as possible. So, relying on the six assessment questions to confirm and justify the existence of impending danger is directly related to how sufficient your information and understanding of the family are.

You also know that safety assessment involves the consideration and judgment about a limited number of impending danger threats. So, the easiest way to answer the question is to show how the six assessment questions match up with the limited number of impending danger threats.

<i>Assessment Question</i>	<i>Impending Danger Threat</i>
<p>What is the extent of maltreatment?</p> <p>What are the circumstances that surround the maltreatment?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
<p>How does the child function on a daily basis?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child has exceptional needs which the caregivers cannot or will not meet. • Child is extremely fearful of the home situation or people within the home. • (Additionally remember that vulnerability is justified here.)
<p>How do the adults function on a daily basis?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One or both caregivers are violent. • One or both caregivers cannot control their behavior. • (Additionally caregiver protective capacities are considered here.)
<p>What are the general parenting practices?</p> <p>What are the disciplinary practices?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One or both caregivers have extremely unrealistic expectations or extremely negative perceptions of a child. • No adult in the home will perform parental duties and responsibilities. • One or both caregivers fear they will maltreat the child and/or request placement. • One or both caregivers lack parenting knowledge, skills, and motivation essential to protecting a child. • (Additionally caregiver protective capacities are considered here.)

Once again we emphasize that the documentation you provide regarding what you learned and believe to be the facts that depict a family is what confirms and justifies the impending danger threats. If you identified any single impending danger threat – say caregivers have extremely unrealistic expectations for a child – your documentation related to parenting general and disciplinary practices ought to clearly, precisely, and thoroughly provide facts and descriptions that justify your judgment.

Question

What is the value of identifying conditions for return when children are placed?

Answer

As a reminder, conditions for return are clearly stated expectations about what must exist or occur within a child's home in order for a child to be returned home. This is an environmental statement more than a statement about caregivers and what they must do. This is a statement about status or the state of circumstances within a child's home. Basically it is a description of what must be happening in a home and what the home must be like in order for a child to be returned.

It is not unusual that CPS programs do not require a statement and communication with caregivers about the conditions for return when children are placed. Often the conditions for return are "presumed" to exist in case plans or court orders about compliance with services. There are some who believe that the condition for return is that caregivers have successfully achieved the change required by case plans. The problem with these kinds of loose interpretations, understanding, and practices is that they fail to provide clear, fair, and equitable direction and explanation to caregivers about what is necessary for family reunification. Additionally, these approaches can contribute to "raising the bar" from the reason for the placement to something higher – a different standard for getting a child home than the reason the child was placed. So we can say that certainly one value of identifying conditions for return is respect for caregivers and compassion for how families experience and feel about separation.

Another value is the clarity and focus that this concept brings to continuing intervention. Statements about conditions for return are powerful, useful communication that assure that everyone involved from caregivers to attorneys to caseworkers are well informed, have the same understanding, and are focused on removal and return as safety management issues rather than treatment or other case management kinds of issues.

In a recent conversation, a program manager emphasized that the concept and application of conditions for return represents the first step toward in-home safety planning when children are placed. This is a powerful idea and consistent with provisional safety management which always seeks the least intrusive means for protecting children. This value as expressed by the program manager emphasizes that everyone understand the conditions for return immediately establish the placement within a time and circumstance-limited process aimed at in-home safety management.

Conditions for return remind us that children can be kept safe at home while planned change and treatment occur and while caregivers continue their work on changing. Circumstances can be created, people can be involved as resources, schedules and routines can be adjusted, certain behavior can be monitored or curtailed. These kinds of conditions can be brought into existence and operation so that children can go home more swiftly within in-home safety management strategies.

There are likely many other values that support the application of this concept in practice and safety decision making. We'll finish our answer here, however, by noting the obvious. Caregivers are empowered by:

- knowing what the rules are,
- knowing what the expectations are,
- knowing that they are being dealt with fairly,
- knowing that the rules will not change, and
- knowing the judgments will be fairly made against agreements reached when children are removed.

Caregivers would not necessarily refer to conditions for return as decision-making criteria but we do here consistent with rules, boundaries, and expectations. These criteria provide the basis and justification for reunification.

They provide a continuing benchmark for judging and knowing when reunification can occur. They serve as the content and rationalization for communicating with caregivers about where things stand and how and why decisions about placement and reunification are occurring.