

EXPLAINING THE SDM® SAFETY ASSESSMENT PROCESS TO FAMILIES

SDM® Safety Assessment

Explain to the family that the structured safety assessment process helps in these situations.

- When thinking about immediate and severe conditions that commonly place a child in danger within his/her own home.
- Identifying and using a caregiver's actions, resources, and relationships to develop a plan that builds immediate safety for a child.
- When determining whether there is a need for protective placement.
 - » The safety assessment is based on agreed-upon thresholds and research about the impact of these conditions on children.
 - » This assessment helps workers consider the special vulnerabilities of young, disabled, or isolated children.
 - » The assessment describes caregiver behaviors and household conditions that pose severe and immediate danger to a child.
 - » The safety assessment also helps to identify caregiver behaviors and resources that can serve as immediate protection for the child or help control the danger.

Safety Planning

The following is an example of what workers can say to help families understand the safety-planning process.

- We want to make sure you clearly understand the specific danger that needs to be controlled.
- We will try to come up with ideas together for actions that can be taken right now to stop the danger for now.
- You have the right to inform those who are necessary to the plan about exactly what will happen. We will get agreement and commitment from everyone.
- We will decide how everyone will know whether the plan is working or not.
- We will write it all down, including concrete next steps and timeline.

Inform the family that if a plan cannot be developed or agreed upon, their child may have to be temporarily placed with a safe person. If that happens, it is the family's right to have a judge decide whether the child can be in their care.

PREPARING TO INTERVIEW ABOUT RISK FACTORS

Safety is first assessed at the initial face-to-face contact with a child and is continually assessed throughout the investigation. Unlike the SDM safety assessment, the SDM risk assessment is conducted later in the assessment and investigation process, after the initial safety decisions have been made, actions have been taken, and a finding has been made.

In addition, some of the information that needs to be gathered to complete the SDM risk assessment may not be specific to the circumstances that brought the family to the agency's attention. This means that after initial contact with the family, additional questions likely will need to be asked to clarify the family's risk level classification. The risk assessment is not intended to be an interviewing guide. The risk assessment is not written in family-friendly language, and it looks a bit like a "test."

- Look at the risk assessment through the lens of what is already known: the SDM safety assessment is complete and an investigation finding was made, and records of the family's history with child protective services have been reviewed and/or conversations with collateral information sources have been held.
- Reflect on the family's cultural context. Consider how to make agreements with family members and how to ask questions about risk items in a way that respects the family's perspective.
- Consider the family's context of trauma related to past history, current reasons for involvement, and the agency's involvement.
- Take brief notes, grouped into several categories, to help structure conversations with the family regarding the risk assessment.
 - » Pre-visit: Allegations, prior history of investigation, services and child injury, number and age of children in the home, primary and secondary caregivers.
 - » Child information: Developmental, physical, emotional, and behavioral health and conflict with the law.
 - » Housing
 - » Parenting information: Physical care, disciplinary practices and styles.
 - » Primary and secondary caregiver information: History of abuse and neglect as a child, substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence.
- Establish agreements with the family about the risk assessment conversation and share the purpose and procedures for completing the assessment.
- Use solution-focused questioning and the interviewing ladder structure to engage the family in conversation about the topic areas that need to be discussed.

- Review the information that was shared about the specific risk factors. Explain to the family that once the assessment has been scored, findings will be shared and next steps discussed.

SDM® Risk Assessment

One key way to help family members engage as partners in the assessment and decision-making process is to ensure that they understand the purpose and processes that support those decisions. Here are some tips for explaining the SDM risk assessment to families.

- Use solution-focused questioning to help create agreements around a shared desire to keep the child safe, now and in the future.
- Explain that the SDM risk assessment uses information about the family to help determine:
 - » Whether action needs to be taken to reduce the likelihood of an incident of abuse or neglect occurring in the future; and
 - » Whether it is recommended that the family participate in services to help reduce future problems.
- If the court is involved, explain that the agency's responsibility is to use the best available methods to decide how to intervene. In voluntary cases, the assessment aids understanding of whether opening a case for services might help prevent future maltreatment.
- The worker should explain that he/she will ask about a set of factors about the caregiver, the child, and the family, and that these factors have been found in professional research to have a relationship to an increased chance that a child in the family will be abused or neglected in the future. Also explain the following:
 - » Some of these factors are not within the family's control, and some are about the past.
 - » The presence of a factor is not about shaming or blaming, but about understanding the family's story so that support and help can be offered to decrease the family's vulnerability.
 - » The factors are objective and measurable, but they are *not* all that can possibly be known about a family.
- Provide an analogy to a profession that uses actuarial risk assessments to help people make decisions (e.g., the insurance, medical, or airline industries). A good example is to ask whether the person knows someone who went through a high-risk pregnancy. Explain that the pregnancy's being identified as high-risk does not mean anything *will* happen; it means the doctor watched the patient more carefully and used extra testing and support to make sure things went well.