Safety Assessment Information Gathering

Six Questions

There are six areas of family life that can provide pertinent and sufficient information to complete an effective assessment of threats to child safety. Experience has confirmed repeatedly that the information related to these six questions can be effectively gathered by child welfare staff. The six areas of consideration contained within the following questions include:

1. **What is the nature and extent of the maltreatment?**
2. **What surrounding circumstances accompany the maltreatment?**
3. **How does the child or children function on a daily basis?**
4. **How does the parent(s)/caregiver discipline the child?**
5. **What are the overall parenting/child care practices used by the caregiver?**
6. **How does the parent(s)/caregiver manage his/her own life on a daily basis (this focuses on how the parent functions in an adult role outside of his/her parenting role).**

These six questions are not for the family to answer but are for you. The questions provide the boundaries for what you seek to understand about a family and the data foundation from which you identify the presence of threats to child safety. You cannot have a good safety assessment if the information gathered is only about the incident, who did what to whom, etc.

The information contained in the six questions needs to focused, relevant, have depth and breadth, be corroborated by second sources, and interpreted accurately. If information collected is weak or insufficient, every step in the process that follows, i.e., identification of presence or absence of threats, safety decisions, safety plans, etc., will be seriously compromised. Similarly, if there is an excellent comprehensive safety assessment but an inadequate safety analysis, children will continue to be removed who do not need to be and children may remain at home when safety cannot be managed in the home.

1. What is the nature and extent of the maltreatment?

This question is concerned with the maltreating behavior and the immediate physical effects on a child. It considers what is occurring or has occurred and what the results are (e.g. hitting, injuries.) The answer to this question also results in a finding of maltreatment (as in a substantiation of the alleged maltreatment.) This question is typically the focus of most investigations. So, it is very important. However, relying only on information from this question is inadequate for assessing safety.

Information that answers this question includes:
   • Type of maltreatment

• Severity of the maltreatment
  • History of the maltreatment
  • Description of specific events
  • Description of emotional and physical symptoms
  • Identification of the child and maltreating caregiver

2. What surrounding circumstances accompany the maltreatment?

This question is concerned with the nature of what accompanies or surrounds the maltreatment. It addresses what is going on at the time that the maltreatment occurs or has occurred. It serves to qualify the nature of the maltreatment.
Information that answers this question includes:
  • The duration of the maltreatment
  • Caregiver intent concerning the maltreatment
  • Caregiver explanation for the maltreatment and family conditions
  • Caregiver acknowledgement and attitude about the maltreatment
  • Other problems occurring in association with the maltreatment (like substance use or mental disturbance)

3. How does the child or children function on a daily basis?

This question is concerned with a child's general behavior, emotions, temperament and physical capacity. It addresses how a child is from day to day rather than focusing on points in time (i.e., CPS contact, time of the maltreatment event.) A developmentally appropriate standard is applied in this area of inquiry.

Information that answers this question includes:
  • Capacity for attachment
  • General mood and temperament
  • Intellectual functioning
  • Communication and social skills
  • Expressions of emotions/feelings
  • Behavior
  • Peer relations
  • School performance
  • Independence
  • Motor skills
  • Physical and mental health
  • Functioning within cultural norms

4. How does the parent(s)/caregiver discipline the child?

This question is concerned with the manner in which caregivers approach discipline and child guidance. Discipline is considered in the broader context of socialization – teaching and guiding the child. This question is broken out from parenting generally because we found that this aspect of family life is highly related to both risk of maltreatment and threats to child safety.

Information that answers this question includes:
- Disciplinary methods
- Concept and purpose of discipline
- Context in which discipline occurs
- Cultural practices

5. What are the overall parenting/child care practices used by the caregiver?

This question explores the general nature and approach to parenting which forms a basis for understanding caregiver-child interaction in more substantive ways.
Information that answers this question includes:
- Reasons for being a caregiver
- Satisfaction in being a caregiver
- Caregiver knowledge and skill in parenting and child development
- Caregiver expectations and empathy for a child
- Decision making in parenting practices
- Parenting style
- History of parenting behavior
- Protectiveness

6. How does the parent(s)/caregiver manage his/her own life on a daily basis (this focuses on how the parent functions in an adult role outside of his/her parenting role).

This question is concerned with how the adults/caregivers in the family feel, think and act on a daily basis. The question here focuses on adult functioning separate from parenting. For instance, here we are concerned with how these adults in the family behave regardless of whether they are parents or not.

Information that answers this question includes:
- Communication and social skills
- Coping and stress management
- Self control
- Problem solving
- Judgment and decision making
- Independence
- Home and financial management
- Employment
- Citizenship and community involvement
- Rationality
- Self care and self preservation
- Substance use
- Mental health
- Physical health and capacity
- Functioning within cultural norms