

Safety Threshold

Safety Threshold:

A threat of danger is a specific family situation or behavior, emotion, motive, perception or capacity of a family member that threatens child safety. The danger threshold is the point at which family functioning and associated caregiver performance becomes perilous enough to be perceived as a threat or produce a threat to child safety. The Safety threshold determines impending danger.

In order to determine if a safety threat exists **ALL** of the 5 criteria must be met:

1. Severe consequences to a child.
2. Immediate or will occur in the near future.
3. Vulnerable child in relation to the safety threat.
4. Out-of-Control – No responsible parent or adult in the home that can prevent the threat.
5. Behaviors, conditions, etc., are specific, observable and clearly understood.

Determining the Safety Threshold

Safety threats are essentially risk influences that are active at a heightened degree and greater level of intensity. Safety threats are risk influences that have crossed a threshold in terms of controllability that has implications for dangerousness. Therefore, the safety threshold includes only those family conditions that are judged to be out of a caregiver's control.

As far as danger is concerned, the safety threshold is consistent with severe harm. Severe harm includes such effects as serious physical injury, disability, terror and extreme fear, impairment and death. The safety threshold is in line with family conditions that reasonably could result in harsh and unacceptable pain and suffering for a vulnerable child.

Sufficient Family Information to determine the Safety Threshold

Threats of danger occurring in front of the social worker demonstrate the need for protection and urgent response. Some cases are so obviously dangerous that it really doesn't require much analysis or the application of some criteria to know that a child is not safe. These present safety threats are the basis for an emergency removal decision. Because little is known, often the only protection action the agency can make is removing the child.

Present danger is defined as immediate, significant, and clearly observable severe harm or threat of severe harm occurring in the present requiring immediate protective response. Present danger may be a basis to determine that "Imminent Harm" under RCW 13.34.050(1) exists and therefore may be a basis to seek immediate removal if other less intrusive options for immediate protective actions will not assure child safety.

Once present danger is assessed and action taken (if there is an existing safety threat) information collection must continue. Some cases are far more difficult to assess a child's safety. Often these cases are made harder by the fact that information is less adequate than you'd like in order to judge. When applying the safety threshold there is no substitute for sufficient information. The more you have the better off you are and the more confidence you will have that your judgment is correct. Get as much information as you can obtain and understand about these six questions.

Evaluate the child's safety in their own home even if the child is temporarily placed. Consider the parents, family, who interacts or responds to the child as a parent. So consider biological parents, the sleep-over boyfriend, and live-in grandmother. Would these threats exist if temporarily absent boyfriend returns home? You may need to consider more than one household if the child spends time in the home of the other parent.

Applying the Safety Threshold

A family condition, behavior or situation is only a threat to safety if it meets the following safety threshold criteria.

- 1. Severe consequences to a child:** This is consistent with harm that can result in significant pain, serious injury, disablement, grave or debilitating physical health or physical conditions, acute or grievous suffering, terror, impairment, death. *Severity* is consistent with anticipated harm that can result in pain; serious injury; disablement; grave/debilitating physical health conditions; acute/grievous suffering; terror; impairment; death.
- 2. Immediate or will occur in the near future:** A belief that threats to child safety are likely to become active without delay; a certainty about an occurrence within the immediate to near future that could have severe effects. *Imminence* refers to a belief that threats to child safety could become active at any time; a certainty about occurrence within the immediate to near future.
- 3. Vulnerable child in relation to the safety threat:** A child who is dependent on others to ensure their protection, basic needs and safety. Without this protection the child's physical and emotional health is susceptible to serious harm. Vulnerable is judged according to the child's physical and emotional developmental ability, their mobility, size and dependence. Vulnerability is not judged by age.
- 4. Out of-Control – No responsible parent or adult in the home that can prevent the threat:** Refers to family conditions that can directly affect a child and are unrestrained; unmanaged; without limits or monitoring; not subject to influence, manipulation or internal power; are out of the family's control. Primary caregivers may be present in the home but incapacitated, so that no able, responsible adult is

present to provide protection for a child living in the home. Incapacitation may be pervasive, periodic or situationally induced. Incapacitation may be emotionally or physically related. Incapacitation may be associated with use of substances.

This includes situations in which basic care and supervision are not occurring because of the absence of primary caregivers. Primary caregivers' whereabouts may be unknown; primary caregivers' absence from the home may be frequent, unpredictable, sporadic, random or even predictable.

Danger exists for children when something in the family and home is out of control. That means that what is happening is not being controlled by anything or anybody within the family network. This is the key characteristic about "control" that supports child welfare professional's judgments with respect to families (unsafe children) who require child welfare intervention and those (safe children) who do not.

Child welfare agencies serve families who are not able to manage danger. Threats to a child's safety occur in families every day, yet CPS reports do not occur and CPS does not intervene. The reason is simple. Families manage the danger; they control the threats to a child's safety and assure the child is safe. Another way of considering this is to recognize that safety doesn't exist solely because there are no threats or danger present in the child's life space. Safety exists because responsible adults control threats or danger when they become apparent. These responsible adults act in the same way that CPS does. They substitute for the non-protective parent; they control the impending danger.

- 5. Behaviors, conditions, etc., are specific, observable and clearly understood:** Danger is real; can be seen; can be reported; is evidenced in explicit, unambiguous ways. *Specific* means a family condition that exists as a impending danger is observable and can be specifically described or explained; the danger is real; can be seen; can be reported; is evidenced in explicit, unambiguous ways.

Closing

Sufficient information is crucial to judging whether a family condition or behavior is actually a threat to a child. Threats to child safety may be present in families where no child maltreatment has occurred or is occurring. Maltreatment can be mild, moderate or severe. Threats to child safety are always severe in nature. Also, it should be evident that while some family circumstances are quite sad and concerning and may in fact be CPS related, not all meet the safety