

# Child Welfare Assessment and Planning Benchcard

## Supporting Informed Court Decisions



Effective child welfare decision-making depends on knowing which information matters most at each point in a case. When decision makers have clear guidance about what to consider and what to set aside, children and families experience more consistent, equitable, and safety-focused outcomes.

The Structured Decision Making (SDM) model, together with complementary tools such as Conditions for Return (CFR), provides a research-informed framework that brings clarity and structure to complex child protection decisions. Each assessment and planning tool supports a specific purpose, such as identifying immediate safety threats, estimating the likelihood of future harm, determining appropriate interventions, guiding case planning, and informing decisions about placement, reunification, and case closure.

This benchcard summarizes the key assessments, planning tools, and decision-support processes used throughout a child welfare case. It outlines what each tool measures, when it is required, and what information workers should be prepared to present in court. These tools, including Intake and Safety Assessments, Risk and Prevention Assessments, Safety Plans, Case Plans, Conditions for Return, and placement safety evaluations, which promote a shared understanding among Child and Family Services Specialists (CFSS) workers, supervisors, legal partners, and families.

By ensuring that all parties are evaluating the same information in a consistent and structured way, the SDM model and CFR support fair, transparent, and legally sound decisions. Together, they help align practice with policy, improve communication in court, and strengthen safety, stability, and timely permanency for children and families.

## Definitions

**Intake Assessment:** The screening section of the intake assessment helps child abuse hotline workers determine if the current report requires a child protective services (CPS) investigation response. The response priority section helps workers determine how swiftly an investigation must be initiated for those reports accepted for investigation.

**Safety Assessment:** The assessment helps workers at all points in a case determine if there are active safety threats and if interventions are necessary to mitigate the safety threat. The Safety Assessment is completed within the first 24-hours of the first face-to-face contact with the family for the Initial Assessment.

- Safety in the context of the SDM system means looking for serious and imminent threats to a child.
- Serious means that the harm would require medical or mental health attention or emergency services, and that if the threat cannot be contained, the child could not remain in the home.
- Imminent means that there is a reasonable expectation that the harm will occur in the next week or month. In the SDM system, safety is assessed at first contact with a family, and again whenever a threat to safety occurs.

A new Safety Assessment should be completed when

- A new report of abuse or neglect is reported to the Hotline and accepted,
- When a change of circumstance occurs (i.e. birth of a child in a household with an open case, composition of household changes as someone moves out or into the home, a new safety threat is identified, a safety threat has been resolved or mitigated, or interventions become available to create a safety plan, etc.),
- Prior to reunification,
- Prior to a change in the permanency plan, and
- Prior to case closure.

**Risk and Prevention Assessments:** These actuarial assessments estimate the likelihood of future incidents of neglect or abuse based on past and present circumstances and assist the Initial Assessment CFSS in determining the appropriate level of intervention based on the risk level. Risk and Prevention Assessments inform the same decision: The risk assessment is used when maltreatment has occurred, and the prevention assessment is used when there are safety concerns but no allegations of maltreatment by the caregiver.

- Risk evaluates the probability that harm will occur in the next year to two years. The higher the risk, the longer it is necessary to demonstrate acts of protection before being persuaded that the harm will not occur again. The worker will also consider the child's vulnerability, the safety measures demonstrated by the parents in the past, and the family's existing safety net.

Information gathered to complete the risk assessment informs the case planning process through the identification of needs and strengths.

- **Needs** are the underlying conditions in the home that may contribute to

safety threats or risk factors.

- **Strengths** are areas of a family's life where they exhibit power and decision-making and are also areas that can be built upon to achieve safety.

**Assessment of Placement Safety and Suitability:** This assessment is completed when an allegation of child maltreatment is made in a **foster home**, or when concerns about a child's safety in a placement arise. It helps the CFSS determine whether any safety threats or concerns exist and whether a safety plan could effectively address those concerns, allowing the child to remain in the foster home.

**Safety Plan:** A safety plan is a written agreement developed with the family that clearly identifies the safety threats and outlines how those threats will be managed to keep the child safe. The plan stays in place for as long as needed and must be regularly reviewed, evaluated, and adjusted to ensure it remains effective.

**Case Plan:** A written agreement developed by the CFSS in collaboration with the family and other team members. It outlines the goals, objectives, and actions needed to support the child and family. Each plan is individualized and includes specific steps, responsibilities, and timelines to help the family meet the identified goals and ensure the child's safety and well-being.

**Conditions for Return:** CFR are specific, observable circumstances that must be present to safely reunify a child with their parent or caregiver under an in-home safety plan.

**Family Team Meeting (FTM):** A meeting that is convened to create, implement, evaluate and update a Safety Plan and/or Case Plan that furthers an individual's/ family's achievement of their goals and the child's safety concerns.

**Case Mapping:** Case mapping is a clear and structured process used to understand a family's situation. It supports CFSS and the family team in developing a shared view of the case by identifying the key worries or risks, recognizing what is going well, and outlining what needs to occur to ensure child safety. Case mapping also helps identify barriers that could delay permanency and guides the team in creating a focused plan to achieve safe and timely permanency.

- This process can be used directly with the family team or as a staffing tool for CFSS to support informed decision-making and coordinated planning.

**CAFAS (Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale):** Completed by CFS-licensed clinicians, this assessment evaluates the overall functioning of youth ages 5-19 with high acuity needs. Results, combined with clinical judgment, guide service recommendations and the level of care across eight domains.

- Assessments are completed every 90 days until stabilization or step down in care.

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## Releasing Assessments

Assessments are released upon request and can be released to be following people signified with an X.

Role	Intake	Safety	Safety Plan	Risk	Case Plan	CFR
Judge		X	X	X	X	X
County Attorney	X	X	X	X	X	X
Police	X	X	X	X		
GAL		X	X	X	X	X
CASA		X	X	X	X	X
Parent/Guardian in household		X	X	X	X	X
Assigned Attorney		X	X	X	X	X
Participants			X			

These are general rules that apply in most cases; however, exceptions may occur. An APSS is a specialized assessment, and a court order is required for its release.

## Juvenile Court Proceedings

Protective Custody/Temporary Custody Hearing		
Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	Systematic way to identify the presence or absence of imminent danger of serious harm (safety threats); presence or absence of protective capacities; and whether or not a plan could be developed that would provide sufficient protection if the child remains home. Each item has an accompanying definition to help increase consistency in what is considered a safety threat.	The specific facts that supported marking a safety threat. Reasons identifying protective capacities that were considered insufficient to directly mitigate the danger or safety threat.
Adjudication Hearing		
Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	See above (Protective/Temporary Custody).	The specific facts that supported marking a safety threat. Information supporting the presence of a safety threat may be relevant to the question of adjudication. Reasons existing protective capacities were considered insufficient to directly mitigate the danger, OR reasons a safety plan is controlling the danger.

## Juvenile Court Proceedings, continued

SDM Risk Assessment	An actuarial tool to estimate the probability that a child in this household will be maltreated in the next two years.	The family's risk level. Whether the scored risk level matched the worker's impression. The facts the worker relied on for scoring items.
SDM Prevention Assessment	The resulting risk level of low, moderate, high, or very high is a VALID ESTIMATE OF PROBABILITY, but not a PREDICTION.	
Conditions for Return	Clarifies what circumstances must be in place to create an in-home safety plan	The specific condition or behavior needed to create an in-home safety plan.
Disposition Hearing		
Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	See above (Protective/Temporary Custody).	Whether any safety threats have already been resolved. Whether any unresolved safety threats remain. If child is in the home, the actions being taken to protect the child. If child is out of the home, what needs to be resolved or controlled before the child can return.
Conditions for Return	See above (Adjudication)	If the child is out of home, provide updates regarding progress or barriers to creating an in-home safety plan.
Permanency and Review Hearing		
Assessment	What it is/does	What a worker should be able to describe
SDM Safety Assessment	See above (protective/temporary custody). For families with a child in out-of-home care with a goal of reunification, this assessment helps the CFSS determine when a child may safely be returned to the home.	Whether any safety threats have already been resolved. Whether any unresolved safety threats remain. If child is in the home, the actions being taken to protect the child. If safety decision supports case closure. The worker will be able to speak to why they are recommending further out of home placement or reunification; including specific safety threats or demonstrated family safety.
Conditions for Return	See above Adjudication	If the child is out of home, the worker will be able to speak to progress toward safe return or need for alternative permanency due to lack of progress. Describes outstanding conditions needed to create an in home safety plan.